

# Historic live oaks abound in St. Landry Parish

*"The Town Talk"* William Johnson, Gannett Louisiana March 19, 2015



(Photo: Freddie Herpin;ODW)

When the first Acadian settlers arrived to start a new life in Louisiana, Louque's Shady Oak in Arnaudville was there to greet them. The Live Oak Society documents suggest that it may have been there even before Europeans knew the New World existed.

Society chairwoman Coleen Perilloux Landry, of Alexandria, said the only way to truly know the age of a live oak is to be there when the acorn is planted.

"Some oaks grow faster than others. It is all about the quality of the soil and the availability of water," Landry said.

Even so, she said the tree is probably more than 500 years old.

With a measured girth of 33 feet, it would take seven people with hands linked to encircle it.

Although it is the largest of St. Landry Parish's registered live oaks, it is certainly not the only one.

To be registered, a live oak must have a girth (waistline) of 8 feet or greater. Trees with girths of more than 16 feet are classified as centenarians, meaning they are probably more than 100 years old.

Of more than 100 registered oaks in St. Landry Parish, a dozen fall into the centenarian class.

Landry said the parish is home to the most beautiful live oaks in the state.

Although he lives in Central Louisiana, her work with the society takes her throughout the state and beyond.

"You have some of the most gorgeous oaks in the state. The alley of oaks at the Academy (of the

Sacred Heart) in Grand Coteau is beautiful,” said Landry, who also praised a number of oaks in Opelousas, Washington and Arnaudville.

Although every community in the parish has at least a few registered oaks, the towns of Washington and Arnaudville have the most.

Arnaudville’s total would be even larger, but it straddles St. Landry and St. Martin parishes. Numerous Arnaudville trees are therefore listed in St. Martin Parish.

Opelousas also has dozens of registered oaks, including the famous Jim Bowie Oak on Courthouse Square.

In recent years, as word of the registry program has spread, other communities, most notably Eunice — thanks to the efforts of the Bulb and Blossom Garden Club — have joined the list.

Landry said inclusion on the registry offers two advantages.

“It is an honor. People like to register their oaks and give them a name,” she said.

The other advantage is protection. She said state and parish officials tend to respect registered oaks and prevent their destruction for a new roadway or other development.

Registering an oak is free, Landry said, “though donations are greatly appreciated.” To register an oak, visit the Live Oak Society’s website at [www.lgcfinc.org/live-oak-society.html](http://www.lgcfinc.org/live-oak-society.html) and click on the register link. “Everything you need to know is there,” she said.

The society has 7,500 live oaks on its registry, most in Louisiana but at least a few in all 14 southern states to which the tree is native.

Allen Owings, a horticulturist with the LSU AgCenter, called them a state treasure.

“Noted for its strength and longevity, this stately tree was one of the major tree species that survived the wind and flooding of Hurricane Katrina,” Owings said.

He said now is a great time to provide care and maintenance to your live oak trees.

“From selecting trees at the garden center to planting, pruning and fertilizing, this is the time of year for live oak maintenance,” said Owings, who said live oaks are one of the most frequently sold trees at garden centers.

“If you intend to plant a live oak, select a tree with a well-developed central leader system. And be sure the tree was properly pruned at the nursery. Proper pruning at a young age is important for live oaks longterm,” he said.

Most home gardeners should plant trees growing in 3- to 15-gallon containers, although you can purchase live oaks that are much larger. It is hard, however, for an average homeowner to handle planting trees larger than those growing in a 15-gallon container.

He said, when planting, be sure to follow these recommendations:

- Make the planting hole the same depth and two to three times as wide as the container in which the tree has been growing.
- Make the sides of the planting hole rough, not smooth.
- Refill the planting hole with the same soil that came out of it.
- Do not amend this backfill soil with compost, pine bark or similar materials.
- Water the tree during the planting process to eliminate dry pockets that will desiccate the new growing roots.
- Mulch trees after planting.
- Fertilizing live oaks is not recommended the first year after planting.

But Owings said the most important thing you can do is give you live oak room to grow.

“Most of the time, live oaks are now planted on 30-foot-by-30-foot spacing. This is, however, way too close,” said Owings, who recommended 90-foot spacing.

He said people routinely plant live oaks between streets and sidewalks.

“Once again, this is the wrong tree in the wrong place,” Owings said. “Be sure to plant live oaks where they have room to grow and do what they want to do.”