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Native Oaks of El Dorado County
By Heidi Napier
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California is blessed with about 22 species of native oaks. Some are trees, and some are shrubs. Six of these species are commonly found in El Dorado County: the Blue Oak, Valley Oak, Interior Live Oak, Canyon Oak, California Black Oak and Huckleberry Oak. All of these except the Huckleberry Oak are adapted to summer heat and drought. The Huckleberry Oak is found at higher elevations in the Tahoe area and is a low-growing, evergreen shrub. Blue, Valley and California Black Oaks are deciduous, and the others are evergreen. The Valley Oak is the largest oak in the US and found only in California. It used to cover much of the Central Valley and may live 500 years. A preserved section of a large Valley Oak trunk is in the lobby of County Building C, and the growth rings are marked with labels telling the dates the rings were formed.

Our native oaks are survivors; most of them can take poor, rocky soil and little or no summer water. Unfortunately, they are not so good at surviving the changes that humans have brought to California. Clearing for building and agriculture have greatly decreased many native oaks species. The type of landscaping that we have brought to our state is not friendly to our oaks. Lawns and other thirsty landscapes are a death sentence to trees that are adapted to dry summers. Many native oaks will develop a fungal infection of their roots from summer irrigation, and this kills them slowly, as evidenced by gradual loss of the leaf canopy.

Urbanization damages trees in other ways. Paving over the roots of any tree will starve it of water and oxygen, and this is especially damaging to native trees that might be over 100 years old. These trees depend on an extensive root system that may extend beyond the drip line of the tree and grow as deep as 30 feet to find water. Trenching through root zones is also harmful, and changing the grade over roots is not good because it covers them with more soil or exposes them by removing soil.

Native oaks have fascinating behavior called masting. Blue and Valley Oaks coordinate their efforts to produce acorns. In a mast year, almost all the oaks in most of California produce a

heavy acorn crop. In other years, few acorns are produced. This phenomenon occurs in other trees, and it's being studied, but we don't know how the oaks communicate and decide when to produce a bumper crop. It appears unrelated to weather; last year was a mast year for oaks, in spite of four years of drought. Because so many wild animals depend on acorns for food, masting has a profound effect on wildlife.

Join UCCE Master Gardener Heidi Napier this Saturday, June 4th for a free class on Living with Oaks. Our county is full of lovely native oak trees that are a critical part of our environment. This class will cover identification, pruning, fire safety, general care, diseases and pests, and landscaping around them. Class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon at the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C on 2850 Fairlane Court in Placerville.

On Wednesday, June 8th Master Gardener class Little Gardens for Kids, will introduce youngsters 5 years and older to miniature gardening. Pre-registration along with a $7.00 materials fee is required, go to http://ucanr.edu/kidssmallgardens to reserve your child's place and make payment. Call the Master Gardener office for more information; each class is limited to ten kids. Class times: 9:30-10:30; 10:45-11:45 at Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive in Cameron Park.

UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions at local Farmers Markets, and Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/mgenews/. You can also find us on Facebook.