

GUEST ESSAY

Why We Should All Be Chasing Acorns

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By Margaret Renkl

Ms. Renkl is a contributing Opinion writer who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

Here is the sound in our family room on a windy day in October: *BAM-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam*. All the windy day long, it's *BAM-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam-bam*. When the barrage began a couple of weeks ago, our dog thought we were under attack. He ran between the storm door and the window, back and forth, back and forth, looking for intruders and barking his head off.

What he's hearing are acorns dropping from the white oak tree on the other side of our house. The acorns hit the roof, bounce down the slope, crash into the metal gutter and then drop to the deck. I race outside as soon as I hear one hit, trying to beat the squirrels and the chipmunks to the oak tree's bounty. It's unseemly for a grown woman to be racing chipmunks for chipmunk food, but I'm collecting acorns for a good reason.

As Douglas W. Tallamy explains in his splendid 2021 book, "The Nature of Oaks: The Rich Ecology of Our Most Essential Native Trees," oaks are keystone plants, the central life form upon which so many other species in the ecosystem depend. Hundreds of insects and caterpillars feed on oak leaves, and those insects in turn feed birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and even other insects. In fall and winter, acorns feed many of them all over again. Because so many predators eat the creatures that eat the acorns, a good year for oaks is a good year for everybody. "No other tree genus supports so much life," Dr. Tallamy notes.

It probably goes without saying that oaks are commercially valuable, too, used in making everything from furniture and flooring to cabinets and whiskey barrels. Those utilitarian purposes go a long way toward explaining why the vast oak forests once found in the United States have been destroyed in many places and are too often fragmented where they remain.

We understand the ecological benefits of oak trees, both in sustaining biodiversity and in storing carbon to mitigate the effects of climate change. We understand how many commercial industries rely on the wood from oaks. But even though we know those things, "older white oak trees are not being replaced by younger white oak trees at a pace that will support long-term sustainability," according to the White Oak Initiative. The state of white oaks is just one example, but you know things are bad for a species when neither environmental nor business interests are being served by current attitudes and practices.

In my neighborhood, giant old trees are being lost to development at a prodigious rate. Some of them are cut down to make room for ever-bigger houses. Some are killed inadvertently during the construction of those new homes. Still others are removed out of nothing more than fashion — to "improve" the curb appeal of the house or to be replaced by a less "messy" tree, among other foolish reasons. Oaks, which grow so large and scatter the yard with acorns, are often the first to go when a developer buys a house to tear down.

I took note when the Department of Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries at the University of Tennessee's Institute of Agriculture asked for help in collecting viable white oak acorns to use in reforestation. But with all the trees lost in my neighborhood during these years of rapid growth, I have a different plan for my acorns.

It's possible to buy young trees from a nursery, of course, but oaks do better when planted from acorns, according to Dr. Tallamy, and now is the time to collect them. Unlike acorns in the red oak group, which germinate in springtime, acorns in the white oak group send out a taproot soon after falling, which makes autumn the ideal time to plant the ones I'm gathering from my tree.

Last fall I tried to start some acorns from a friend's chestnut oak, which also belongs to the white oak group, but the squirrels dug them all up and carried them off. This year I'll plant my acorns in flowerpots and protect them with bricks and hardware cloth. Come spring, I'll hand the seedlings out like Easter eggs. If I can talk my new human neighbors into planting these seedlings in their yards, they'll have shade again someday, and our wild neighbors will have food and shelter, too.

Maybe it seems pointless, all this hope based on nothing more than a couple of dozen acorns. Even if they all germinate, even if they survive rabbits and drought long enough to reach acorn-bearing age, how much difference will it even make? In the context of rampant deforestation and massive biodiversity loss, will it matter if one small neighborhood in one growing city becomes a safe place for oak trees and the creatures they shelter and feed?

My answer lies in the acorn itself: As the old English proverb goes, mighty oaks from little acorns grow.

But a lot, I admit, depends on what happens next. "We hope that society as a whole can rethink its attitudes. Simple, everyday acts can go a long way," João Vítor Gomes de Oliveira of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil told the Times Opinion editor Isvett Verde. If planting an oak tree is the first small step in rethinking everyday life, it could matter a lot.

We don't even necessarily need to plant the acorns ourselves; a policy of benign neglect toward the yard might be enough. A single blue jay can collect 3,000 to 5,000 acorns a year, gathering them from up to a mile away. The birds often store their prizes by pressing them into disturbed soil. There's a lot of disturbed soil in our little half acre of suburbia, partly owing to my old friend the mole and partly owing to the holes I leave behind when I pry up the bush honeysuckle and privet and other invasive seedlings that take root here every year. Fortunately for the rest of the backyard creatures, blue jays don't always remember where they stored their acorns.

Already our white oak is no longer alone. One unexpected benefit of turning our yard into a meadow is that I've discovered a willow oak seedling and three baby shingle oaks growing where my husband once mowed. Both species belong to the red oak group, and we don't have any red oaks at our place. Someday, if the weather and the rabbits cooperate, I will be collecting red oak acorns, too, to save for spring planting.

In the meantime, don't feel bad that I've swiped a few acorns from my wild neighbors. There's plenty of natural food in this yard: cedar and dogwood drupes; berries like pokeweed, arrowwood and beautyberry; the seeds of redbud and maple and hackberry trees; and zinnias and coneflowers and black-eyed Susans gone to seed. No one here is going hungry. If I have anything to do with it, no one ever will.

Margaret Renkl, a contributing Opinion writer, is the author of the books "Graceland, at Last: Notes on Hope and Heartache From the American South" and "Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss."

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