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**161. © Propagating the oaks of the Interior West.** Skogerboe, S. International Plant Propagators' Society, combined proceedings, 2009, 59:281-284. 2010.

## Propagating the Oaks of the Interior West®

**Scott Skogerboe**

Fort Collins Wholesale Nursery, P.O. Box 1875, Fort Collins, Colorado 80524

Email: pyrus@frii.com

### INTRODUCTION

Most of us know the old adage, “If we want something done right, we have to do it ourselves.” Propagating the native oaks of the interior portion of the American west is a perfect example of this old saying. As with many regionally important plant species, it is often difficult and sometimes impossible to find these oaks in the nursery trade. We cannot easily just open up the nursery catalogs on our desks and order these plants, so if we want them, we have to grow them ourselves.

At our Nursery, located in north central Colorado, we grow many of our regions native oaks because our conditions are vastly different than in much of the rest of the country. We start with having a precipitation rate of only 14 in. per year. Our mineral soils are thin and lacking in organic matter and the pH is very alkaline, often times greater than 8. Our springs and falls are very unsettled, as we can have spring freezes into the teens in late May, and in the fall, I’ve experienced the first frost come as an arctic blast blowing in with -5 °F temperatures. Our native oaks have evolved in these inhospitable conditions, and can take what nature throws at them. For us, they can be nearly cast iron.

The oaks we grow include *Quercus gambelii*, the Gambel oak; *Q. turbinella*, the desert live oak; *Q. ×mazei*, the Colorado foothills oak; *Q. oblongifolia*, the Mexican blue oak; and *Q. undulate*, the wavyleaf oak. In order to grow these oaks follow these steps.

### PROPAGATION AND PRODUCTION

**Step 1. Locate These Plants in the Wild.** In my experience, collecting from the wild is the best way to insure better species purity. It would be easier for me to travel down to the Denver Botanic Garden and collect most of these oaks off their accessions, but since all the oaks in their collection are growing side by side, there is no telling how hybridized the seedlings would be as oaks are notoriously promiscuous. I have had the honor of developing a friendship with Dr. Allan Taylor, a retired professor from the University of Colorado. Although he was in the Department of linguistics, he is an expert on the woody plants of the Rocky Mountains and has spent a lifetime exploring our region. Dr. Taylor took me under his wing and showed me his favorite stomping grounds. Generally speaking, here are some of the places to look for these oaks.

***Quercus gambelii*.** The Gamble oak is the most abundant of our native oaks, and is famous for its ability to form colonies by suckering, providing protective habitat to small animals against predation. It has an abundant acorn crop, an important food source for many animals including our native black bear that gorge themselves each fall in preparation for winter hibernation. It is readily found throughout the interior west at higher elevations. Especially prevalent along the Front Range of Colorado from Douglas County southward and into New Mexico where I collect acorns in the third week of August.