



WTPL/Shawn Nixon

# Big Spring Watch: English oak

English oak is the most common tree species in the UK, especially in southern and central broadleaf woodland.

Also called pedunculate or common oak, it is a deciduous tree which can grow to 40 metres in height and can live for more than a thousand years.

The distinctively-shaped leaves measure up to 10cm in length when mature, with 4-5 deep lobes and smooth edges. The leaves have almost no stem and grow in bunches.

The fruit, acorns, are produced in autumn; they are 2-2.5cm long and sit on stalks.

## Where to record

English oaks are mostly found in mixed woodland; huge, isolated specimens may also be seen in fields, hedgerows and parks.

## What to record

**English oak first leaf:** The oak leaf should be fully open and recognisably the shape of the mature leaf, although it might be smaller.

## Tips

Please make your recording of mature trees, not newly planted ones.

Even trees of the same species, close to each other, can behave differently. If in doubt, wait until you can see first leaf on three trees.

## When to record

Depending on what spring temperatures are like and where you live, year on year leafing dates can vary hugely.

First leaf can be seen as early as mid-March, or may be as late as the end of May.

## Why English oak?

Volunteers have been recording the first sighting of the English oak leaf for many years, and as part of Nature's Calendar since 2000. In 2015, it will be interesting to see how fast spring moves for the English oak, and how this compares with previous years.

Our climate is changing; climate change will produce some 'winners', who are well adapted to change, and some 'losers', who cannot adapt quickly enough.

Long-term monitoring of species like English oak will help scientists gain a greater understanding of this issue, and provide policymakers with hard evidence.



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English oak

## Fabulous facts

Oaks may easily live over 700 years, outliving all native trees except the yew. The oak's ability to weather winter gales earned it the name the 'King of the Forest'.

Oaks are important trees for wildlife, attracting a variety of insects which in turn attract birds such as nuthatches, flycatchers, warblers and woodpeckers, to name a few. The acorns provide food that attracts wildlife such as squirrels and small mammals.

The shade that the oak provides encourages the growth of wild flowers like bluebells, primroses, wood anemones, foxgloves and wood sorrel.

Oak was favoured for its strength and durability in Tudor timbered houses, and artists used its even-grained, honey-coloured wood for carving and turning. The bark was valued by the leather tanning industry for its high tannin content.

In spring, fresh young oak leaves can be used to make a delicious, medium dry white wine.

Oak timber is highly prized and was used in ship building. More than 5,500 oak trees were needed to construct *HMS Victory*, the equivalent of 40 hectares (100 acres) of woodland.

The acorns helped to fatten domestic pigs released into woodland and forests to feed, a practice known as 'pannage'.

More than 2,000 species of fungi grow in association with oak. Oak timber infected by the beefsteak fungus (*Fistulina hepatica*) is called 'brown oak', and is used by furniture makers.

A considerable number of galls are found on oak leaves, buds, flowers, roots, etc. Examples are oak artichoke gall, oak marble gall, oak apple gall, knopper gall, and spangle gall.

Oak galls and iron salts were used to make a purple-black ink, known as 'iron gall ink', which was the standard writing ink in Europe from 1200 until the nineteenth century.

## Not to be confused with...

**Sessile oak** is the other native oak of the UK. Unlike the English oak, which has almost no leaf stem and acorns which sit on stalks, the sessile oak has long leaf stems, and no stalk on the acorn cup.



Sessile oak

## How fast does spring move?

Nature's Calendar has teamed up with BBC Springwatch to seek your help in answering the question 'how fast does spring move?'

### Recording tips

Once you have seen a sign of spring, please record it! Remember that you need to register on the Nature's Calendar website first.

Registration [naturescalendar.org.uk/bswregister](https://naturescalendar.org.uk/bswregister)

Recording [naturescalendar.org.uk/survey/login](https://naturescalendar.org.uk/survey/login)

Please choose somewhere you visit regularly (at least weekly) to make your record, to help ensure that you spot when something happens for the **first** time.