

# Area's state trees have rich history

By Arthur O. Tucker

If a universal refrain of children exists, it must be "Are we there yet?" Every summer we trekked across the U.S. to visit relatives and devised schemes to prevent this constant question.

We created surprise bags of cheap goodies that could be opened every so many miles or when we found a certain landmark on the map. It promoted map reading among our children, but even this event quickly produced boredom.

Now, looking back, I wish that we had done something on the trivia of state symbols, and this would be very easy to do now with handheld Internet access.

Do you know the state snack food of Illinois? Popcorn! The state vegetable of Louisiana? Sweet potato! The state muffin of Massachusetts? Corn muffin! The state exercise of Maryland? Walking! The state dog of Virginia? American foxhound! The state beverage of Delaware? Milk!

The state flowers and trees are a bit more mundane, and many people think they know them. I wrote about the state flowers on June 22. Delaware's state tree is the American holly (*Ilex opaca*).

The choice of this state tree has an interesting history. During the early 20th century, the abundance of American holly in Delaware gradually led to a major export industry in the U.S.

Charles C. Jones, Sr., a fertilizer salesman from Milton, was one of the pioneers of the holly export industry in Delaware, and Milton thus became known as "The Holly Capital of the World." In 1939, American holly was adopted as the state tree with the influence of Delaware state forester William S. Taber, who acted upon the suggestion of his secretary, Olive Wilkins.

Maryland's state tree is the white oak (*Quercus alba*), another native species, chosen in 1941. Maryland's most famous white oak was the Wye Oak at Wye Mills, Md. Estimated to be nearly 500 years old, the Wye Oak was the largest white oak on record in the nation, measuring 31 feet, 10 inches in circumference and 96 feet tall.

In 2002, the Wye Oak succumbed during a powerful thunderstorm. Its descendents live on,

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however, not only at the Wye Oak State Park in Talbot County, but even at Mt. Vernon in Virginia.

The state tree of Virginia, chosen in 1956, is the same as the state flower, the dogwood (*Cornus florida*).

In years past, the hard, close-grained, heavy, strong wood of dogwood was used for the hubs of small wheels, the handles of tools, barrel-hoops, bearings of machinery, turnery and occasionally for engraver's blocks.

Today dogwood is a good ornamental and source of food for birds in the fall but frequently planted in the wrong places. Dogwood is typically an understory tree, i.e., it prefers shade. Flowers, however, are more abundant in full sun if the tree receives plenty of moisture during the long, hot summers of Delmarva.

Most people plant their dogwoods in full sun but then forget to water them during droughts; dog-



Submitted photo

**During the early 20th century, the abundance of American holly in Delaware gradually led to a major export industry in the U.S.**

wood anthracnose then gradually creeps into the stressed tree, and eventually the branches die back.

If you are interested in state symbols, such as the state donut of Massachusetts or the state car-

nivorous plant of North Carolina, explore the Web sites, such as [www.statesymbolsusa.org](http://www.statesymbolsusa.org). The National Arboretum has a good Web page on the state trees and state flowers at [www.usna.usda.gov/Gardens/collections/statetree-flower.html](http://www.usna.usda.gov/Gardens/collections/statetree-flower.html).

If you would like to grow seedlings of famous trees, such as the Gettysburg Honeylocust or the Elvis Presley Sweetgum, check out [www.historictrees.org](http://www.historictrees.org). If you want more information on the National Register of Big Trees, go to [www.americanforests.org/resources/bigtrees](http://www.americanforests.org/resources/bigtrees); download the pdf file on Big Trees of Delaware under the link for Delaware.

*Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Tucker) for more information about this article.*

The Downstate Daily

Delaware State News, Sunday, July 20, 2008

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