



Turkey plants perfect for season

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Turkey! With the holiday season, plants associated with this bird flocked to my mind.

Several plants carry the name "turkey," such as turkey-foot oak, turkey oak, turkey-beard and turkeyfoot grass. My favorite is the turkey-tail mushroom.

Turkey-foot oak is another name used for southern red oak (*Quercus falcata*), because the shape of its leaf resembles the track of a turkey. This oak is a southeastern species ranging as far north as New Jersey, and grows in dry sandy soils in Delaware.

Another species of oak, turkey oak (*Quercus laevis*), has a leaf with three narrow lobes that looks even more like a turkey's footprint. This oak grows in the southeastern coastal plain as far north as Virginia.

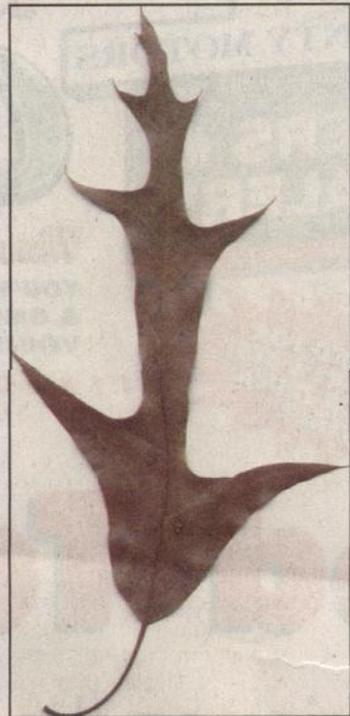
Turkey-beard (*Xerophyllum asphodeloides*), a member of the lily/bunchflower family, has small white flowers clustered on top of a tall stem. This native of eastern North America is now extirpated (gone) from Delaware. Its common name, "turkey-beard," puzzled me, until I learned that male and some female turkeys have "beards" of black, hairlike feathers on their breasts. The plant was named for its dense cluster of narrow leaves that resemble a turkey's beard.

Turkeyfoot is also applied to a species of grass (*Andropogon hallii*), also called sand-bluestem. Here, "turkeyfoot" refers to the three-branched flowering structures.

Turkey-tail (*Trametes versicolor*, formerly *Polyporus versicolor*) is a common type of shelf



Delaware State University/Michael Maciarelllo
Turkey-tail is a fitting name for this mushroom (*Trametes versicolor*, formerly *Polyporus versicolor*).



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Susan Yost

You can see why this tree (*Quercus falcata*) is sometimes called turkey-foot oak.

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or bracket fungus with delightful colorful bands which resemble the patterns on a turkey's tail.

In addition, the fruits or seeds of several plants provide food for wild turkeys. Favorite turkey foods include acorns (*Quercus* spp.) and beechnuts (*Fagus grandifolia*), along with wild grape (*Vitis* spp.), dogwood (*Cornus florida*), Hickory (*Carya* spp.), poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) and grasses.

The wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*), the largest bird native to the open forests of North America, has a remarkable history of near-extinction followed by restoration. The wild turkey's original range covered 39 states, but by 1900 it had been elimi-

nated in both the Northeast and Midwest, and by 1949 only small populations survived mainly in remote areas of the Appalachian Mountains.

The wild turkey has now made a dramatic comeback thanks to reintroduction and protection from hunting.

Two additional turkey tidbits: the turkey was preferred over the eagle as the national bird of the U.S. by Benjamin Franklin, and the domesticated turkey was developed from the wild turkey by Native Americans.

The name "turkey" was given to this bird as a result of mistaken identity. When Europeans first saw it in America, they erroneously thought it was a type of guinea fowl or turkey-cock, a different species that had been brought to Europe through the

country Turkey.

If this error hadn't occurred, turkeys would have a different name, and you might be eating huexoloti (Aztec) sandwiches, or planting pah-quun (Nanticoke Indian) oak trees.

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 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, herbarium educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.