More than just shade: University live oak population an ecological staple for campus

Students can sit under this live oak that is located by Billeaud Hall.

Emily Britt
NEWS WRITER

Scattered all around the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's campus, the live oak trees have become a staple symbol of the university.

Aside from their beauty, the live oaks also do a great deal ecologically for the campus.

“There are 500 species of oak trees, and the live oak is most commonly known in Louisiana,” Bryan Babb, owner of Double BB Farms and certified Northeast Louisiana Master Gardener, said. “The lifespan of oak trees varies from 150 years old to 50 years old depending on the kind of oak tree it is, the pests and other environmental conditions.”

And it is the interaction between the staple trees and the other life on campus that is most fascinating.

“My personal feeling is that each live oak tree is like a whole ecosystem on its own,” James Foret, an instructor in UL Lafayette’s department of geosciences, said.

Foret went into heavy detail about the level at which the trees help wildlife on the campus.

“The way they are planted on campus, they are planted close enough to touch or come close to touching, so the squirrels, the insects and the birds use them like a highway and for protection,” Foret said. “The canopy shades them and cools them. It isolates them from the rest of the ecosystem where the predators are and everything.”

The live oaks also provide food for the animals on campus.

According to the National Wildlife Federation, “Sweet, tapered acorns produced by the trees are eaten by birds and mammals, including sapsuckers, mallards, wild turkeys, squirrels, black bears, and deer.”

Foret also mentioned how the trees provide shelter.

“Bugs live in the grooves of the bark. Squirrels make nests in them. Raccoons live in dens and cavities. They provide all that to the campus ecosystem,” he said.

And that shelter is not just exclusive to the wildlife on campus, but is in equal parts helpful to the human occupants of the university grounds.

“In my opinion, they cool everything — it’s like ten degrees cooler,” Foret said. “So as far as our participation in the ecosystem, they make a cool place for us to walk and stand and talk and sit and study and read — those kind of things.”

The trees also serve as natural umbrellas for those caught on campus in an afternoon shower.

“If you’ve ever been out in the rain, you know the foliage gets wet in a rainstorm, but not all at once,” he added. “It gets wet slowly, and so you have 10 to 12 minutes before it starts dripping in a pretty good shower. The leaves and the branches and all hold a lot of water before they start giving it up to whoever’s standing under it, so it has that benefit.”

And there are even more ways that the trees interact with the human population.

“Live oaks have served humans and animals as food, fuel, lumber, chemicals and shade,” Kim Coder, Ph.D., of the University of Georgia said.

Foret also called attention to the interaction of the live oak ecosystem and other ecosystems.

“There’s a couple of epiphytes that live in live oak trees. Epiphytes are plants that have roots that don’t grow in the soil; Spanish moss is one of them,” he said.

He continued, instead directing attention to the soil rather than the canopy:

“It’s a pretty interesting ecosystem … Most of the places on campus we don’t mow under the trees. That protects a pretty vibrant soil ecosystem. It’s filled with all sorts of microbes that support plant life and break down organic compounds and cycle nutrients for their own use and back to the trees.”

Foret commented on the other plant life on campus, remarking it with much lower esteem.

“The grass they have all over campus? It offers so little of that,” he said. “It’s just not real. It’s a grass lawn, the roots are real shallow. It doesn’t support a lot of insect and animal life. It has a really thin canopy. It’s just not like trees and shrubs that evolve here and coexist with other organisms and live well in our heat and rain and our soils.”

Foret concluded by urging people to take greater notice of the live oaks on campus.

“I just hope people become more aware of their surroundings and observe the world around them … It really enriches your life … because they are not dumb organisms,” Foret said. They are really brilliant; they communicate with each other and they communicate with other organisms and the soil … They are amazing. Appreciate them.”