



'Engelmann Oak'

A Santa Rosa Plateau Treasure

By Bill Trotter

One of the most notable features of the Santa Rosa Plateau is the Englemann Oak (*Quercus engelmannii*), an evergreen tree, occasionally drought deciduous, 16-60' high with equal spread. *Quercus* is a Latin name for oak, while *engelmannii* is from Georg Engelmann (1809-1884), a German born St. Louis physician and botanist, who published on this tree and several others.

Native to Southern California, these oaks exist only in a narrow band that stretches along the foothills and woodlands of Southern California from Pasadena down through Orange, Southwest Riverside and San Diego counties into Northern Baja California. They are found 20 miles or more from the ocean and at an elevation of 500 to 4000 feet. The elevation of the Plateau is roughly 1980 feet.

Engelmann Oaks are listed as "uncommon" by most botanists and is probably the most imperiled of all tree oaks. The bluish green of the foliage makes it easy to discriminate between this and the dark green of our other Plateau Oak tree, the Coast Live Oak. The Engelmann hybridizes freely with the Scrub Oak, which is a shrub, making identification sometimes difficult.

The Engelmann Oak and its habitat have been greatly reduced in Southern California, with only scattered and isolated stands left. The foraging of cattle and the rapid growth of housing were the main destructive forces. The Plateau is one of the two last stands of this species and the only place where they are reproducing naturally. The largest specimens are found on Mesa de Colorado, near the Vernal Pools.

Acorns were one of the major undomesticated sources of food for wildlife and early Native Americans, and continue to be used by wildlife. In California, they were the chief source of food, and played an important part in where different Indian tribes settled. While squirrels and scrub jays depend on the large quantities of acorns as food, they also inadvertently aid in propagating the oaks when burying the acorns. With cattle no longer on the Plateau, the seedlings can survive.

On the Plateau, the oaks provide food, nesting sites and protection from predators. The Engelmann Oak on the Plateau represents a major factor in this ecological balance.