

Willow Oak (*Quercus phellos*): A Fenway Jewel



One of the living jewels which studs Boston's "Emerald Necklace" of park systems is a stately specimen of *Quercus phellos*, the Willow Oak. The tree is growing in the Fens near Boylston St., with the Fenway on one side and a steep bank leading to a shelter and the distant river on the other. Sturdy and majestic, the tree stands nearly 60 feet tall with a branch spread equal to its height. Its growth habit represents the best of both the willows and the oaks because its narrow, graceful leaves have a fine, willowlike texture, while its symmetrical rounded crown and dense branching habit give it the nobility of an oak. The 34-inch diameter and mature habit of this specimen imply an age of at least 80 years, so it seems likely this tree was



among the original plantings directed by Olmsted when he designed the "Emerald Necklace" in the 1880's.

Quercus phellos is a native North American species, common further south but rare in Massachusetts. It is distributed on the Atlantic coast from New York to Florida, along the Gulf Coast, and north on low sites into Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Nevertheless, it is hardy as far north as southern New Hampshire. The species generally prefers moist sites such as swamp borders, but will grow under dryer conditions.

The Willow Oak resembles the Pin Oak in a number of ways, and in fact is as widely planted in the south as Pin and Red Oaks are in the north. The tree grows rapidly, suffers from few pests, and has a shallow root system which makes it easy to transplant. The handsome, fine-textured form it develops is often characterized by slender drooping side branches, much like the Pin Oak. If planted more widely, the Willow Oak could provide desirable and interesting variety to the abundance of Pin and Red Oaks now in Boston; the Fenway tree stands as a living testament to the virtues of the species.

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