Quercus robur ‘Fennessii’: The Fennessy Oak,
A Family Tree.

I knew from when I was young, through family “folklore” and from conversation with my revered uncle, Dr. Richard Fennessy OFM, that one of my great-great-grandfathers – also Richard Fennessy – had discovered a new variety of oak tree, which was named after him. We believe him to have been the Richard Fennessy who is listed on the chart of our family (genealogical) tree, who died in about 1873, and was one of the sons of Richard Fennessy of Ballynattin who had ten children.

More research needs to be done into investigating plant registers of the time to find out exactly when the oak was first listed and named.

My own Uncle Richard, always having an interest in trees and forests, had occasion to visit the Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin, Dublin in the 1980s and met with the then Curator, Dr. Charles Nelson. Dr. Nelson subsequently wrote to Fr. Richard on the 23rd September 1985 stating that he had visited Holland in August of that year and discovered a nursery where the owner was propagating Quercus robur ‘Fennessii’. He added a comment: “tis a strange tree with tattered leaves, but one certainly of interest”. The shape of the leaves is undoubtedly the most striking feature of the variety.

Dr. Nelson wrote again on the 12th of November 1985 and stated: “I have certainly filed the information among my notes on Irish nurserymen and when I get more time will look into the matter in a bit more detail as I think a note should be published about the oak and its background. I saw the oak being propagated in a number of Dutch and Belgian nurseries. It was growing at Kalmthout in an arboretum owned by the de Belder family, and was being propagated by a nursery at Zundert, just across the border in Holland.

Location note: Kalmthout is about 19 km north of Antwerp in Belgium. Zundert is 18 km north east of Kalmthout, but in Holland.

In their book Trees of Ireland, Natural and Naturalised (1993), Nelson and Walsh describe the oak as follows: “Quercus robur Fennessii (Heterophylla) is little known in this country (Ireland) today, although it originated as a seedling in Messrs. Fennessy’s Nursery, Waterford, in about 1820. The leaves are very variable in shape, some much contorted, others almost linear, and many with deeply cut margins. I have seen hundreds of trees in Dutch nurseries, but remarkably none are sold in Ireland. It is not an elegant plant, merely a curiosity”.

By way of general description, we can say that the oak is a member of the family Fagaceae. Other genera within the family Fagaceae include Beech (Fagus), Southern Beech (Nothofagus) and Chestnut (Castanea). Oaks are a large group of plants, with well over 400 different species known. Most are trees, some growing to over 30 metres, while a few are shrubs. The larger trees generally require a temperate climate and rich soil to achieve full height. In the British Isles two oaks predominate, the Pedunculate (Quercus robur) preferring more alkaline soils and the Sessile (Quercus petraea) preferring more acid soils.

The Pedunculate Oak, of which the Fennessy Oak is a derivative, is also known as the English Oak or Common Oak. A hardwood, it is world renowned for its exceptional durability and has been highly prized for shipbuilding for many centuries. Several features distinguish Quercus robur and help to identify it:

- The bark is fissured and the branches are often crooked.
- The dark green leaves are deciduous, spaced alternately on the branchlets and have short stalks.
- The leaf shape is obovate or oblong with three to six lobes on each side.
- The buds at the end of the branchlets are in groups of five, and this is a useful point of identification.
- Male and female flowers occur on the same tree but on separate inflorescences.
- The male flowers are formed on tassel-like catkins and the female flowers are borne on upright stalks at the base of the leaf stalk.
- The catkins ripen and their pollen is spread by the wind.
- The most distinctive feature of the oak is its fruit, the acorn, the lower part of which is enclosed by a cup.

The above description applies to the species, Quercus robur. The ‘Fennessii’ cultivar is characterised mainly by the difference in the leaf shape. Generally the leaves have deeply cut lobes and the end lobe may be very long and thin.

Along with the reference in Trees of Ireland, Natural and Naturalised, there are several other contemporary references to the Fennessy Oak. In these references I have retained the publisher’s spelling and emphasis as far as possible.


**QUERCUS ROBUR**

In their 1997/1998 catalogue, Mallet Court Nursery lists the variety as: *Quercus robur* ‘Fennessii’. Up to 10m. Leaves variously shaped, some long and narrow scarcely lobed, some deeply and raggedly cut.

- W. J. Bean in his 1976 publication Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles, records: 
  *QUERCUS ROBUR* cv. ‘FENNESSII’. – Leaves very variously shaped, some long and narrow, scarcely or not at all lobed, often hooded; others deeply and raggedly cut, never so regularly as in ‘Filicifolia’. They usually hang loosely from the branches and are 3 to 9 inches long, ½ to 2 inches wide. Raised in Ireland by Fessessey and Son of Waterford around 1820. It was put into commerce as *Q. pedunculata fennessi*, but the varietal epithet became corrupted to “Trinessii”. Loudon included it in his *var. heterophylla* and it has in consequence acquired the cultivar name ‘Heterophylla’(*Arb. Et Frut. Brit.*, Vol. 3 p.1735 and fig. 1571).

Bean refers above to the publication of Loudon (1838). Thus we need to include older specimens that carry the name *Quercus pedunculata* ‘Heterophylla’or *Quercus robur* ‘Heterophylla’. Mitchell (1974) mentions at the end of his discussion on *Quercus robur* ‘Filicifolia’:
  *Q. Robur* ‘Heterophylla’(17m. Kew), even more rare, has leaves to 20cm, sessile, usually hooded and less deeply cut into curved lobes.

It is assumed that sessile in this case refers to the leaf positioning, rather than the acorn positioning. Clearly the length of leaf described by Mitchell is consistent with contemporary specimens of *Quercus robur* Fennessii.

- In The New RHS Dictionary of Gardening (1992) a number of varieties are listed under the entry for *Quercus robur*, including:
  ‘Fennessii’: leaves flat or convex, margins deeply incised, lobes irregular, narrow.

- The variety is also listed in the RHS Plantfinder (1996) as: *Quercus robur* ‘Fennessii’, followed by index codes for three nurseries able to supply, which are:
  Mallet Court Nursery, Curry Mallet, Taunton, Somerset, TA3 6SY, England.
  Madrona Nursery, Pluckley Road, Bethersden, Kent, TN26 3DD, England.

*Editor’s note: I have seen this oak stocked by Orchardstown Nurseries, Orchardstown Cross, Waterford and by Jan Ravensberg, whose nursery is near Clara, Co.Offaly*

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