

Quercus imbricaria

Shingle Oak

Fagaceae



Quercus imbricaria courtesy Julie Makin, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

***Quercus imbricaria* Rare Plant Profile**

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection
State Parks, Forests & Historic Sites
Forests & Natural Lands
Office of Natural Lands Management
New Jersey Natural Heritage Program

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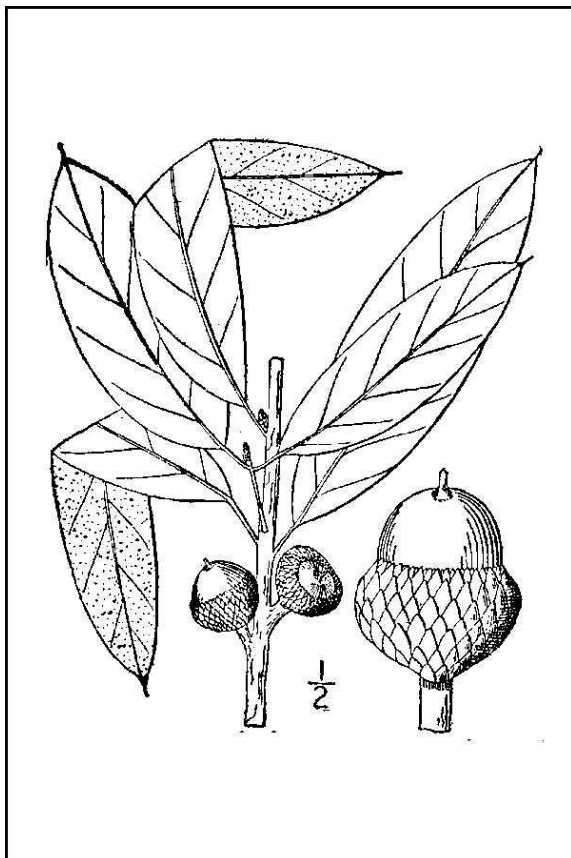
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Life History

Quercus imbricaria (Shingle Oak) is a deciduous tree in *Quercus* Section *Lobatae*, which is informally referred to as the red oak group. Mature *Q. imbricaria* trees are usually under 20 meters in height with a trunk diameter of 15–50 cm, although some individuals are taller (up to 32 m) and have trunk diameters close to a meter. Shingle Oaks generally have a distinct central axis but trees growing from stump sprouts or in disturbed habitats can exhibit irregular branching or even develop a bushy aspect. The gray-brown bark is flat with shallow fissures and ridges. *Q. imbricaria* leaves are elliptical, smooth-edged, and bristle-tipped—they are shiny dark green above and evenly hairy on the underside. It takes at least 25 years for a Shingle Oak tree to reach reproductive maturity (Schopmeyer 1974). Oaks have unisexual inflorescences: The staminate catkins are many-flowered and pendulous while the pistillate are few-flowered and sessile. The single-seeded fruits of *Q. imbricaria* (acorns) take two years to develop. They are typically solitary or in pairs on short peduncles. The acorns are ovoid or round and about 10–18 mm in diameter, with a scaly basal cup that covers $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ of the nut. (See Britton and Brown 1913, Fernald 1950, Wagner and Schoen 1976, Gleason and Cronquist 1991, Stein et al. 2001, Jensen 2020).



Left: Britton and Brown 1913, courtesy USDA NRCS 2024a. Right: Courtesy Julie Makin, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

Quercus imbricaria blooms in late April or May, concurrent with leaf expansion, and the acorns are mature in October of the second year (Hough 1983, Migaskó and Ecseri 2020, Weakley et al.

2024). By mid-November the leaves turn light brown and they remain on the trees throughout the winter and sometimes into early spring, making the trees easy to detect from a distance (Wagner and Schoen 1976). The terminal buds are 3–6 mm long, ovoid in outline, five-angled in cross-section, brown or red-brown, and somewhat silky. Short hairs are present along the edges of the bud scales (Trelease 1931, Petrides 1988, Jensen 2020).



Left: Courtesy Julie Makin, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Right: Steve Hurst, courtesy USDA NRCS 2024b.

The lobeless leaves of *Quercus imbricaria* make it relatively easy to distinguish from most other oak species that occur in New Jersey. *Q. phellos* also has smooth-edged leaves but they are more linear in shape and are not uniformly hairy on the lower surface. The leaves of *Q. laurifolia*, which is reportedly adventive in the state, are smooth on the underside. However, the oaks hybridize readily and that can complicate identification. *Quercus imbricaria* is known to hybridize with nine other species (Jensen 2020), eight of which occur in New Jersey. Hybrids resulting from crosses between *Q. phellos* and several other species may also closely resemble *Q. imbricaria* (Small 1942, Snyder 1994). Wagner and Schoen (1976) observed that *Q. imbricaria* hybrids often have asymmetrical leaves or venation, and Snyder (1994) noted that hybrids involving *Q. phellos* are usually not hairy on their lower leaf surfaces.

Pollinator Dynamics

Quercus species are pollinated by wind and their staminate inflorescences produce copious amounts of pollen. The apetalous flowers and the release of pollen while the leaves are still expanding increase the probability of successful fertilization. Despite the high frequency of hybridization within the genus many species are thought to be partially or entirely self-sterile, although not all of them have been studied. When oaks in Subgenus Lobatae are pollinated a pollen tube is initiated immediately but fertilization and development are typically deferred until the following spring (Elias 1971). According to Schopmeyer (1974), mature *Quercus imbricaria* trees generally produce a crop of acorns every 2–4 years.

Seed Dispersal and Establishment

The Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) is thought to play a critical role in the dispersal of *Quercus imbricaria* acorns (Harrison and Werner 1984, Aizen and Patterson 1990, Bretthauer et al. 2007). Blue Jays eat both seeds and insects but during the fall they focus on mast-fruited trees in the Fagaceae, consuming some of the fruits and caching others. The harmful effects of tannins in the acorns appear to be offset by the simultaneous consumption of larval weevils or other insects that feed on the nuts, serving as an incentive for the jays to preferentially eat the wormy acorns and cache the ones that are not infested (Johnson et al. 1993). The birds have expandable throats that allows them to carry multiple acorns in a single trip. Seeds are often cached 50–500 meters from the source trees but they can sometimes be transported for several kilometers. Cache sites may include hollow trees or old bird nests but the Blue Jays often place individual nuts on the ground and cover them with leaves, facilitating germination. Most ground caching takes place in open woodlands and canopy gaps or along forest edges (Graber et al. 1987, Johnson and Webb 1989, Johnson et al. 1997). Both direct observations and preference studies indicate that Blue Jays favor small to medium acorns when there is a choice, although they will utilize large acorns when smaller ones are not available (Johnson and Webb 1989, Johnson et al. 1997, Moore and Swihart 2006). Data provided by Aizen and Patterson (1990) shows that the acorns of *Q. imbricaria* are medium-sized when compared to other North American oaks: They are slightly larger in size than those of *Q. palustris*—the species preferred by jays in Moore and Swihart's selection study—and half the size of *Q. velutina* acorns, which were utilized at an intermediate level. Although *Q. imbricaria* was not included in Moore and Swihart's preference experiments, Graber et al. (1987) observed that Shingle Oak acorns were often the first choice of fall-foraging Blue Jays in Illinois.



The acorns of most species in Section Lobatae experience an interval of dormancy prior to germination (Elias 1971) and those of *Quercus imbricaria* require a 1–2 month period of cold stratification (Leopold 2005). Oak seeds have a high moisture content and they are sensitive to desiccation so they do not remain viable for long: Consequently *Q. imbricaria* acorns either germinate the first spring after dispersal or they fail to do so at all (Schopmeyer 1974, Wyse and Dickie 2017). *Quercus* species form fungal associations that are usually ectomycorrhizal, meaning that they are external to the plants' roots (Wang and Qiu 2006). However some *Q. imbricaria* seedlings examined by Rothwell et al. (1983) had a dual mycorrhizal condition—the expected ectomycorrhizae were present but endomycorrhizae were also observed inside the root cortex. It is not clear whether that is typical of Shingle Oak or if the investigators recorded an exceptional occurrence.

Habitat

Quercus imbricaria is usually found at elevations between 100–700 meters above sea level, although it occasionally occurs at elevations up to 1500 meters. Typical habitat is dry to moist woodlands, and the trees can tolerate a broad range of light conditions from full sun to dense shade (Bazzaz and Carlson 1982, Leopold 2005, Rhoads and Block 2007, Jensen 2020, Weakley et al. 2024). Occurrences at lower elevations are generally situated in places that rarely flood (Bell 1973, Bretthauer et al. 2007). Shingle Oaks exhibit high water use efficiency, adjusting to drought conditions by slowing growth or reducing the frequency of foliage replacement (McCarthy and Dawson 1990, 1991). *Q. imbricaria* has demonstrated an adaptability to manmade habitats, sometimes becoming abundant along roadsides or hedgerows (Wagner and Schoen 1976, Stoyntoff and Hess 2002). The New Jersey population is situated on and adjacent to a railroad embankment (NJNHP 2024).

Quercus imbricaria often grows as a single tree or in small clusters of individuals (Wagner and Schoen 1976) but in some settings it is a dominant canopy species (Bell 1974, Monk et al. 1989, Bretthauer et al. 2007). It is generally more abundant in early or mid-successional sites, and low replacement rates have been reported in mature stands (Gleason 1912, Bell 1974, Brenner 1952, McBride 1973, Larimore et al. 2008, Eilers 2011). *Q. imbricaria* seedlings can become established in shaded sites, although their growth is likely to be slower (McCarthy and Dawson 1990, Zaczek et al. 1999 & 2000). The higher frequency of young *Q. imbricaria* trees in more open habitats is probably attributable to the caching behavior of Blue Jays (Bretthauer et al. 2007).

Wetland Indicator Status

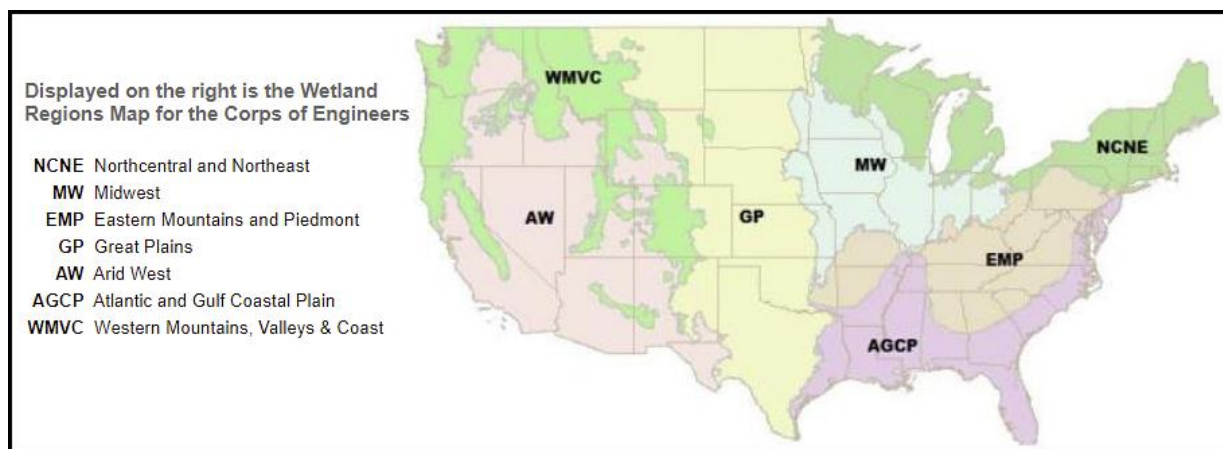


Figure 1. Mainland U. S. wetland regions, adapted from U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (2020).

The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers divided the country into a number of regions for use with the National Wetlands Plant List and portions of New Jersey fall into three different regions (Figure 1). *Quercus imbricaria* has more than one wetland indicator status within the state. In the Northcentral and Northeast region, *Q. imbricaria* is a facultative upland species, meaning that it usually occurs in nonwetlands but may occur in wetlands. In the rest of the state it is a

facultative species, meaning that it is equally likely to occur in wetlands or nonwetlands (U. S. Army Corps of Engineers 2020).

USDA Plants Code (USDA, NRCS 2024c)

QUIM

Coefficient of Conservancy (Walz et al. 2020)

CoC = 8. Criteria for a value of 6 to 8: Native with a narrow range of ecological tolerances and typically associated with a stable community (Faber-Langendoen 2018).

Distribution and Range

The global range of *Quercus imbricaria* is restricted to the central and eastern United States (POWO 2024). The map in Figure 2 depicts the extent of Shingle Oak in North America.

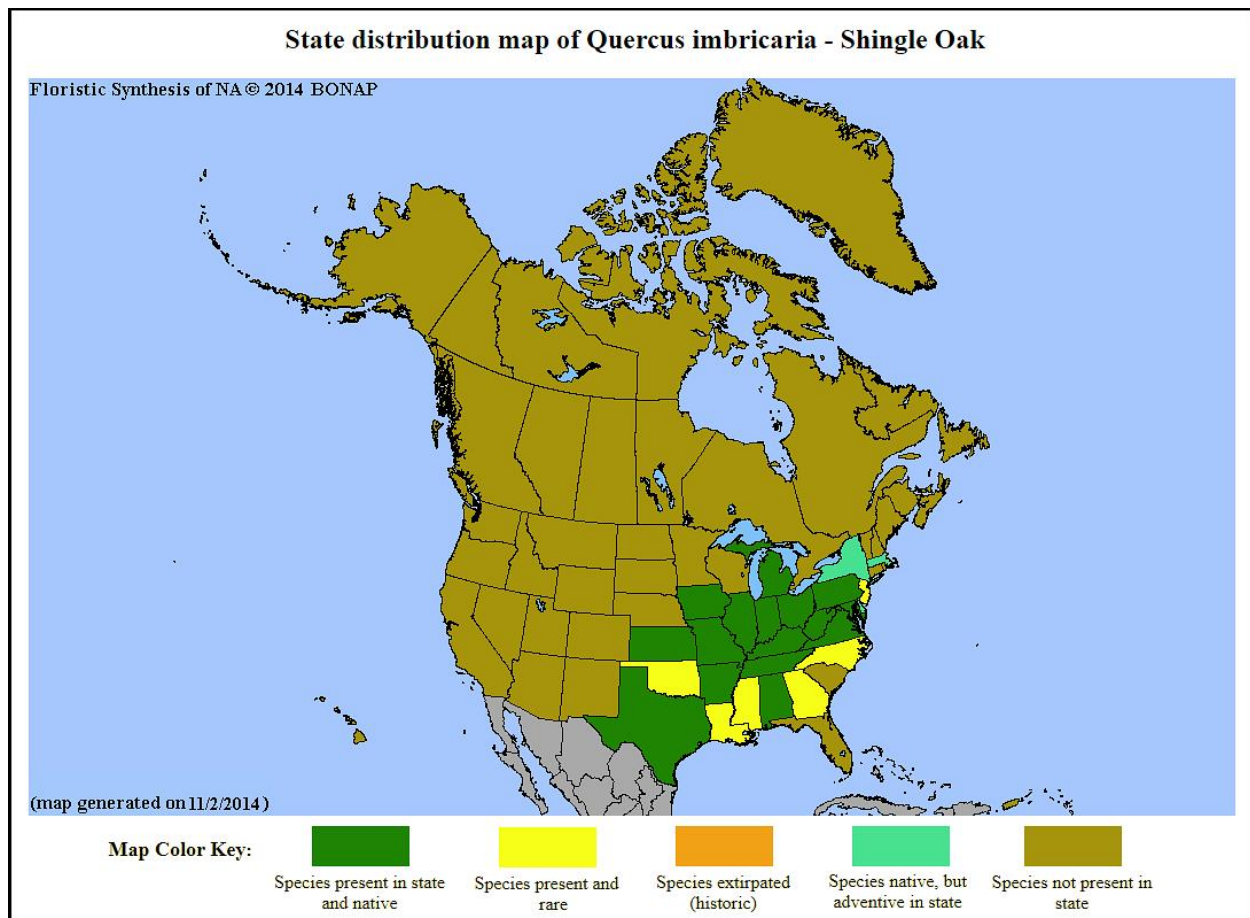
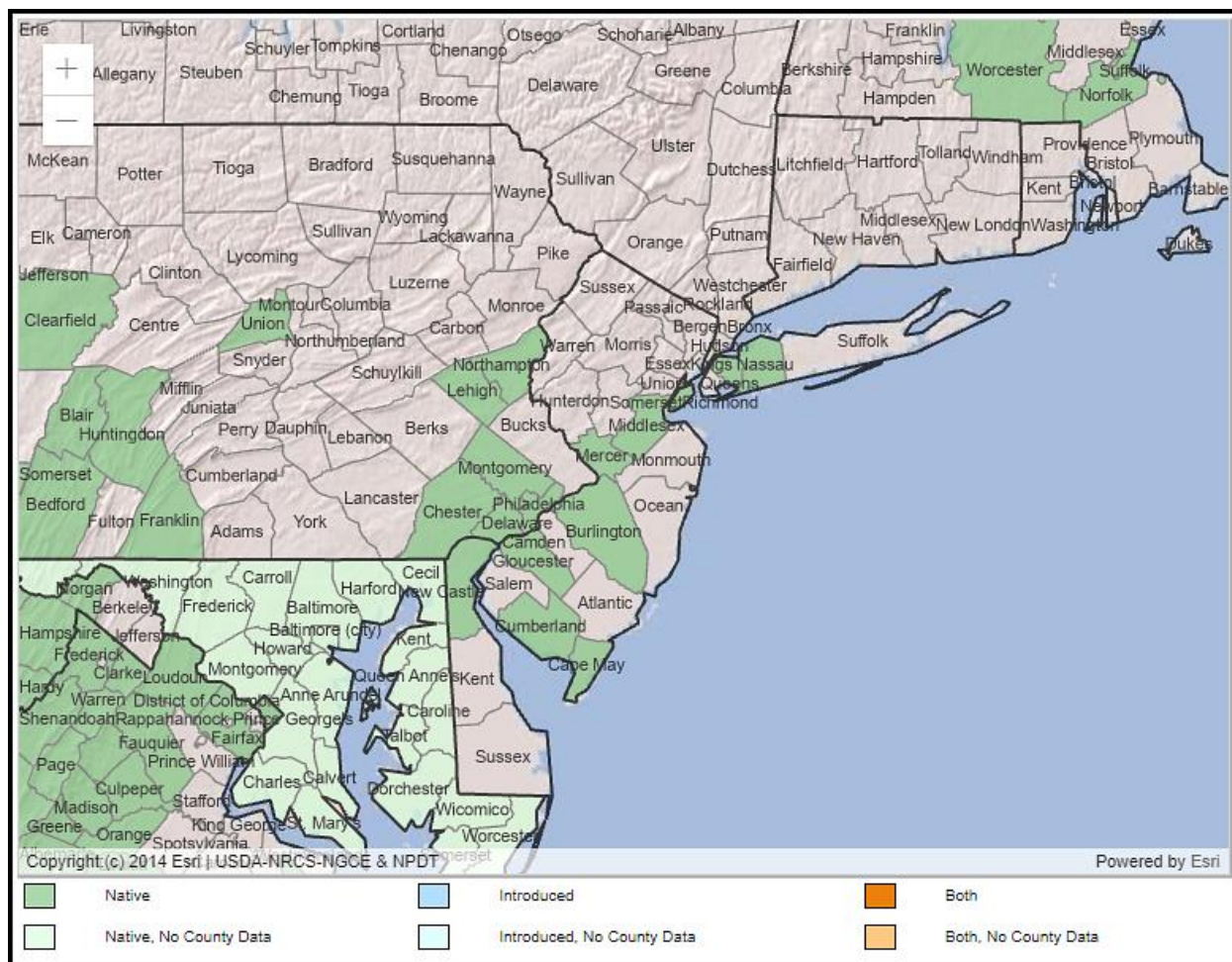


Figure 2. Distribution of *Q. imbricaria* in North America, adapted from BONAP (Kartesz 2015).

The USDA PLANTS Database (2024c) shows records of *Quercus imbricaria* in six New Jersey counties: Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Mercer, and Middlesex (Figure 3). The species has also been reported in Camden, Monmouth, and Salem counties (Mid-Atlantic Herbaria 2024). The data include historic records and do not reflect the current distribution of the species.



Conservation Status

Quercus imbricaria is considered globally secure. The G5 rank means the species has a very low risk of extinction or collapse due to a very extensive range, abundant populations or occurrences, and little to no concern from declines or threats (NatureServe 2024). The map below (Figure 4) illustrates the conservation status of *Q. imbricaria* throughout its range. Shingle Oak is vulnerable (moderate risk of extinction) in one state, imperiled (high risk of extinction) in two states and the District of Columbia, and critically imperiled (very high risk of extinction) in three states. In most of the states where it occurs *Q. imbricaria* is secure, apparently secure, or unranked. Occurrences in Delaware and New York are not accepted as native.

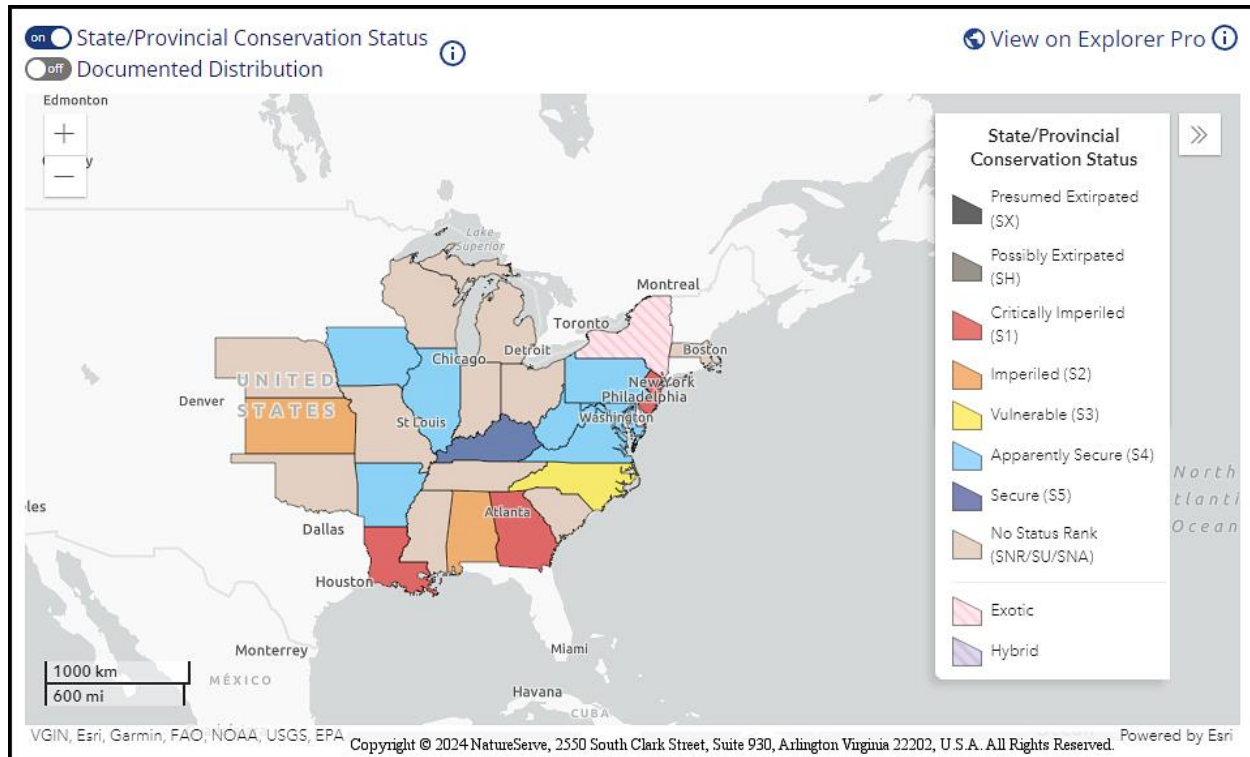


Figure 4. Conservation status of *Q. imbricaria* in North America (NatureServe 2024).

Quercus imbricaria is ranked S1.1 in New Jersey (NJNHP 2024), meaning that it is critically imperiled due to extreme rarity. The S1.1 rank indicates that there is adequate documentation of the species for only one location. *Q. imbricaria* is also listed as an endangered species (E) in New Jersey, meaning that without intervention it has a high likelihood of extinction in the state. Although the presence of endangered flora may restrict development in certain communities such as wetlands or coastal habitats, being listed does not currently provide broad statewide protection for the plants. Additional regional status codes assigned to *Q. imbricaria* signify that the tree is eligible for protection under the jurisdictions of the Highlands Preservation Area (HL) and the New Jersey Pinelands (LP) (NJNHP 2010).

Despite historic reports of *Quercus imbricaria* in nearly half of New Jersey's counties only one population is believed to be a native occurrence of the species. *Q. imbricaria* was not included in any of the early state floras, although Stone (1911) mentioned it as a possible 'parent' species of some hybrid oaks in southern New Jersey. Certain trees that were initially identified as *Q. imbricaria* quickly came into question: Small (1942) noted that a protracted discussion about a Burlington County tree had taken place during a botanical club field trip and Snyder (1994) remarked that debate about a Cape May population went on for several decades before it was resolved as a hybrid occurrence. Fairbrothers and Hough (1973) accepted a number of records that have since been rejected but still classified *Q. imbricaria* as an endangered species due to its rarity in the state. Most New Jersey reports of Shingle Oak turned out to be based on cultivated trees, hybrids, or misidentified specimens (Snyder 1994). The sole accepted occurrence was first documented in 1904 and the population was relocated in 1989, at which time it consisted of about 20 trees (Snyder 1994, 2000). Only a single *Q. imbricaria* tree has been observed at the site in recent years (NJNHP 2024).

Threats

Fairbrothers and Hough (1973) indicated that the conversion of land for housing and agriculture was a threat to New Jersey populations of *Quercus imbricaria*, although some of the occurrences they had in mind were probably stands of hybrid oaks. The single population now believed to be a native occurrence has been reduced in size by maintenance activities associated with a railway corridor (NJNHP 2024).

Fire can have a detrimental effect on *Quercus imbricaria*, and particularly on young trees. A thick layer of bark may help to protect mature trees from fire damage, but Hengst and Dawson (1993) reported that the bark of *Q. imbricaria* was relatively thin in comparison to other oaks. Following a spring burn in an Indiana woodland 40% of the established *Q. imbricaria* trees survived the fire, 30% subsequently reestablished from basal sprouts, and 30% did not recover; while all of the seedlings were destroyed (Dolan 1994). Shingle Oak saplings do not exhibit fire resistance until they reach about 3 meters in height (Hruska and Ebinger 1995). At one Illinois site, Taft (2005) indicated that 85% of *Quercus imbricaria* saplings had been eliminated by a prescribed burn. Taft (2003) recorded an increase in the presence of *Q. imbricaria* seedlings at another site that had been burned during 1989 and 1994, but the seeds were probably introduced after the fires. Johnson et al. (1997) noted that although Blue Jays do not often utilize open grasslands as caching sites the birds were more likely to cache acorns in grasslands that had recently burned.

Quercus imbricaria trees have occasionally been found hosting Eastern Mistletoe, *Phoradendron leucarpum* (Thompson et al. 2008, Overlease and Overlease 2011). Mistletoes are hemiparasitic plants that are heavily reliant on their hosts for water and nutrients. Water demands placed on mistletoe hosts may disrupt normal stomatal operation and reduce photosynthetic activity. The impact can vary widely depending on the initial vigor of the host tree and the extent of the parasite load (Glatzel and Geils 2009).

Insects utilize oak trees in a variety of ways with consequences that range from negligible to devastating. For example, an oak gallwasp (*Zapatella quercusphellos*) induces stem-swelling galls on *Q. imbricaria* (Pujade-Villar et al. 2012). Some stem damage may also result from egg-laying cicadas, as the tips of the branches beyond the oviposition sites usually die off. However, periodical cicadas studied by Clay et al. (2009) exhibited no particular preference for *Q. imbricaria* and cicada oviposition does not typically cause long term damage to mature trees (Kratzer 2024). In contrast, the larvae of slug moths (Limacodidae) showed an unusual penchant for *Quercus imbricaria*—The caterpillars generally favor leaves with smooth lower surfaces so their abundance on the hairy leaves of Shingle Oak was an unexpected result during a study of their feeding preferences (Lill et al. 2006). Nevertheless, the small larvae are not likely to have any noticeable effect on a grown oak tree. The New Jersey Forest Service has identified two insects as a particular threat to *Quercus* species: The Oak Shothole Leafminer (*Japanagromyza viridula*) and the Spongy Moth (*Lymantria dispar*). The Oak Shothole Leafminer is a native fly that is becoming increasingly common in the state. Female flies puncture young oak leaves to feed on their fluids and the holes become enlarged as the leaves expand, resembling Swiss cheese. *Lymantria dispar* is an introduced species that has been present in New Jersey for over a century. The larvae can feed on a wide variety of trees but have a strong preference for oaks,

and host plants can be completely defoliated when moth populations are near the high end of their natural 'boom and bust' cycle (NJFS 2022).

A number of diseases can also threaten *Quercus* populations. Oak Wilt Disease (*Bretziella fagacearum*) is prevalent in the red oak group and is probably the most serious. Elias (1971) noted the rapid spread of the pathogen from the midwest into the eastern and southern states. As of two years ago, the presence of *B. fagacearum* had not been confirmed in New Jersey although it had been documented in adjacent states. The disease typically develops in the uppermost branches and spreads downward, and infected trees may be dead within months or even weeks (Elias 1971, NJFS 2022). Bacterial Leaf Scorch (*Xylella fastidiosa*) can also be fatal, although affected trees decline more slowly, sometimes persisting for a decade after the initial infection. If *X. fastidiosa* is detected early it may be manageable but annual treatments are required (NJFS 2008). *Phytophthora* species are pathogens that cause stem lesions and crown or root rot in woody plants. Experimental inoculation of intact and wounded leaves with *Phytophthora* spp. showed that many eastern trees are also susceptible to foliar infections. No lesions were formed on mature leaves of *Quercus imbricaria* whether the foliage was injured or not, and young leaves were generally only slightly susceptible even when wounded (Balci et al. 2008). It is not clear whether Shingle Oak's apparent resistance to *Phytophthora* extends to woody parts of the plant.

Climate Change Vulnerability

Information from the references cited in this profile was used to evaluate the vulnerability of New Jersey's *Quercus imbricaria* population to climate change. The species was assigned a rank from NatureServe's Climate Change Vulnerability Index using the associated tool (Version 3.02) to estimate its exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity to changing climactic conditions in accordance with the guidelines described by Young et al. (2016) and the state climactic computations by Ring et al. (2013). Based on available data *Q. imbricaria* was assessed as Less Vulnerable, meaning that climate change is not expected to have a notable detrimental impact on its extent in New Jersey by 2050. However, the conclusion was reached with a low level of confidence because the score placed it right on the cusp of moderate vulnerability.

Shifting climactic conditions in New Jersey are resulting in higher temperatures, more frequent and intense precipitation events, and increasing periods of drought (Hill et al. 2020). *Quercus imbricaria* is at the northeastern end of its range in New Jersey, so it is likely able to tolerate warmer temperatures. Although McCarthy and Dawson (1990, 1991) characterized *Q. imbricata* as a relatively drought tolerant species their experimentally imposed drought only lasted for two months and even then some effects on growth and vigor were noted. *Q. imbricaria* acorns are also sensitive to desiccation so the timing and extent of a drought could affect the seeds' ability to germinate (Wyse and Dickie 2017). It is not clear whether or how climate change will influence the spread of oak pathogens in the mid-Atlantic region.

An evaluation in Illinois predicted that *Quercus imbricaria* would cope with climate change poorly or very poorly, particularly under a high emissions scenario. A low emissions scenario might actually permit the species to expand its distribution in certain parts of the eastern United States, though the outcome is likely to depend on regeneration capacity (Iverson et al. 2005 &

2017, Iverson and Taft 2022). There appears to be some potential for *Q. imbricaria* to extend its range northward as the climate continues to change. Shingle Oak can reportedly tolerate winter temperatures between -20 and -40°C (Ballesteros and Pritchard 2020). Johnson and Webb (1989) suggested that transport by Blue Jays could facilitate climate-driven range shifts for species in the Fagaceae, and there is evidence that the jays are already expanding their range in a northerly direction (National Audubon Society 2024).

Management Summary and Recommendations

It is not surprising that a significant proportion of conservation resources have traditionally been allocated to plant species with high economic value, and trees often fall into that category. *Quercus imbricaria* was historically used to make shingles because the wood was easy to split, although the timber is of lesser commercial importance today (ISUE 2024). The oaks have received a lot of attention around alternatives for storage and propagation because their acorns do not remain viable for long. Schopmeyer (1974) found that the life of oak seeds could be extended if they were sealed in polyethylene bags and stored at a temperature just above freezing (4° C). Recent work on *Q. imbricaria* has tested various approaches for cryopreservation of embryonic material and explored techniques for micropropagation using the tissue of dormant buds (Faria et al. 2019, Ballesteros and Pritchard 2020). *Quercus imbricaria* appears to be secure throughout much of its range so there is no urgent necessity for offsite propagation and reintroduction at this time.

New Jersey's *Quercus imbricaria* population is in need of a comprehensive assessment. The single tree observed during the last monitoring visit had several large, dead limbs near the top. However, there could be additional Shingle Oak trees in the adjacent woodland (NJNHP 2024). A thorough search of suitable habitat in the vicinity is recommended. It would be beneficial to monitor changes in the health of the most prominent tree and, if possible, determine the cause of the previously observed limb mortality. Surveyors should also attempt to ascertain whether acorns are being produced in order to evaluate the species' potential for regeneration in that location.

Synonyms

The accepted botanical name of the species is *Quercus imbricaria* Michx. Orthographic variants, synonyms, and common names are listed below (ITIS 2024, POWO 2024, USDA NRCS 2024c).

Botanical Synonyms

Quercus phellos var. *imbricaria* (Michx.) Spach
Quercus aprica Raf.
Quercus imbricaria var. *inaequalifolia* Kuntze
Quercus imbricaria var. *spinulosa* A.DC.
Quercus latifolia Steud.

Common Names

Shingle Oak

Quercus sonchifolia Booth ex G. Kirchn.
Erythrobalanus imbricaria (Michx.) O. Schw

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