

# Learning about Southern Baldcypress

## *Taxodium distichum*

Baldcypress is a tree found in swamps, wet stream banks and bottom lands in the southern part of the United States.

**Characteristics.** Old growth cypress trees once reached heights of 80-130 feet and had diameters of 8-13 feet. The bark is silvery to cinnamon-red and stringy. The leaves are about 1/3" to 3/4" long and arranged in a feather-like fashion along two sides of small branchlets. In the fall the leaves turn brown and the branchlets fall from the trees with the leaves still attached. It has a straight trunk with numerous branches and a narrow conical outline. As the tree ages, it develops a buttressed base and a smooth slowly tapering trunk. The top of the tree tends to flatten out.

**Fruit.** The fruit is a rounded cone, or 'ball,' about one inch in diameter (see image, below right). The outside is covered in irregular polygon-shaped scales. The seeds are contained inside and are irregularly shaped.

**Geographic Range.** Southern baldcypress grow from eastern Texas across the southern Gulf Coast and Atlantic plain. Its range extends north to southern New Jersey and Illinois.

### Additional Information.

- Cypress is one of a very few trees that can survive in standing water.
- Cypress wood is prized for its durability. Many old Acadian homes were built from this wood. The wood, particularly the heartwood, is durable when in contact with soil.
- Cypress trees have "knees" that extend from the root system to above water or soil. The functions of the knees are still not known, although some scientists speculate that they anchor the tree in soft sediments or serve some respiration function.
- Cypress trees often have buttressed, or swollen, bases. This occurs most often in areas where they grow in flooded conditions. The height of the swollen base is a response to flooding.
- Baldcypress trees may live more than 1,000 years, although there are very few remaining that are older than around 200 years. This is because virgin stands of cypress in the United States were logged over the last two hundred years.
- The oldest known balt cypresses east of the Mississippi River are thought to be 1500 years old. They are located along the Black River in Pender and Bladen Counties, North Carolina.
- Cypress must have a yearly wet-dry cycle in order for the seeds to germinate. Seed pods form on trees in late fall through early winter. The seeds fall into moist sediments where they soften. As the water level falls, the seeds germinate on mud flats. Many cypress swamps no longer have this wet-dry cycle because humans have changed the amount and path of water drainage in many watersheds in south Louisiana.
- Nutria find cypress seedlings very tasty and are one of the biggest reasons why is it so difficult to restore cypress forests in south Louisiana.
- *Taxodium* is derived from a Greek word meaning "yew-like" and *distichum* means "two-ranked" and refers to the leaves.

### References:

**Trees of Florida**, 1997, 17<sup>th</sup> edition, FL Dept of Agriculture and Consumer Science, <http://www.fl-ag.com/forest/baldcypr.htm>.  
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Pictures by Tommy and Pam Blanchard