

***Taxodium distichum* (Bald Cypress)**
Bald Cypress Family (Taxodiaceae)

Introduction:

This tree's vibrant, soft-looking, bright green needles are stunning against its shaggy, cinnamon-colored bark. In autumn the fern-like foliage turns bright copper or russet and drops from the tree to form a carpet of soft needles. The fibrous cypress bark that peels off in long strips is highlighted in winter when the tree is without foliage.

Culture:

This conifer requires full sun and acidic soil to thrive. It can tolerate both wet and dry conditions, but becomes chlorotic in alkaline soil. Characteristic "knees" are roots that come above the surface of the soil and help anchor the tree. Knees form only in wet habitats. Knees add a unique characteristic to the landscape but can become a mowing hazard. Bald cypress resists damage from high winds and is considered tough and adaptable.

Selected cultivars:

'**Monarch of Illinois**' - Massive, wide-branching tree reaches 85 feet in height and 65 feet across.

'**Pendens**' - Pyramidal form with drooping branchlets.

'**Prairie Sentinel**' - Narrow habit with shorter branches than the species. This is actually a cultivar of *T. distichum* var. *nutans* (formerly *T. ascendens*), the pond cypress.

'**Shawnee Brave**' - Narrow, pyramidal form adapted to city conditions.

Additional information:

Bald cypress' native range includes the southeastern U.S., where it is the dominant tree in swampy environments. It is one of the conifer species that loses its leaves in the fall.

The natural range of the bald cypress is limited by two factors: the need for constant moisture until a sapling root reaches the water table and the need for seasonal flooding to eliminate invading hardwoods. Bald cypress can grow in standing water. It is equally at home under normal garden conditions.



Botanical Characteristics:

Native habitat: Delaware south to Florida, west to Texas, Missouri, southern Indiana and Illinois.

Growth habit: Pyramidal when young but becoming more rounded at maturity.

Tree size: Reaches a height of 50 to 70 feet with a spread of 20 to 30 feet. It can exceed 100 feet tall in the wild.

Flower and fruit: Monoecious. Male flowers are in 4- to 5-inch-long panicles in March and April. Female cones are rounded, ½ to 1 inch in diameter and purplish before turning brown.

Leaf: Bright yellow-green, feathery foliage appears in late spring, darkens in summer and becomes russet- or copper-colored in autumn before being shed. Needles are short, soft and flat.

Hardiness: Winter hardy to USDA Zone 4.

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Additional information (continued):

The wood of bald cypress is highly valued for its decay resistance and is sought out for construction of boats, docks and bridges. It is the source of the popular cypress mulch used by gardeners and landscapers. The number of mature bald cypress trees is declining because of the slow rate of reproduction compared to the rate of harvest and because of the draining of its swampland habitats.

Around water, bald cypress produces characteristic “knees” that grow up from the root system. It was speculated that the knees aid in oxygen movement to the submerged roots. This is probably not true and the knees may simply help anchor the tree in wet soils. Knees were used by Native Americans as beehives. The term “knee” probably refers to the use of curved knees to support the hulls of wooden ships.

T. distichum var. *nutans* is called the pendant pond cypress because of its nodding (= nutans) branchlets. Taxonomists have recently shifted this plant to being a botanical variety. It was previously its own species - *T. ascendens* - and is still sold as such. The pond cypress is nearly identical to the bald cypress except it has thicker bark, produces fewer knees and has more thread-like foliage that is pressed tightly against the twig.

The genus name *Taxodium* is derived from the Latin name for the yew tree, *Taxus*, combined with the Greek “*eidōs*,” meaning similar to. The specific epithet, *distichum*, means two-ranked, referring to the leaf position on the twig.

Bald cypress makes a distinctive bonsai.

The national champion bald cypress (83 feet) is in Louisiana.

Bald cypress was introduced into the landscape in 1640.



Cypress knees



Female cones