Friday’s Feature
By
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Bald can be beautiful

Arbor Day is a day for planting, celebrating, and appreciating trees. Started by a Nebraska settler, J. Sterling Morton, Arbor Day has spread to many other countries. In Florida, Arbor Day is the third Friday in January, and this year it falls on January 15th.

There are many beautiful trees that thrive in Northwest Florida. One native tree that is attractive all year round is the baldcypress.

Known by the scientific name, *Taxodium distichum*, baldcypress leaves out in the spring with new leaves that are a bright shade of yellowish green. These new leaves slowly expand to produce a ferny, darker green canopy with a very “soft” effect, unusual for a conifer. In autumn, the leaves turn various shades of reddish brown before falling off. Unlike other members of the redwood family that are usually evergreen, the baldcypress is deciduous, losing its foliage in the winter, thus giving it its common name. When the leaves drop in winter, the rich cinnamon brown bark is revealed.

Baldcypress trees are stately trees and can reach heights of 100-120 feet at maturity. In landscapes, they typically reach about 50 feet. Surprisingly, they are moderately fast growers for the first 10 years or so. Some trees can have trunk diameters of 5 feet or more, but 2-3 feet is most common.

They have a beautiful natural form growing in a narrow, upright habit. They maintain a desirably straight trunk and a moderately dense canopy. Unlike many other trees, they do not form double or multiple leaders.

Baldcypress is native from the coastal states along the Atlantic Ocean over to east Texas and north to the middle Mississippi River valley. But it is commonly associated with the swamps of the Gulf Coast.

Baldcypress is ideal for wet locations, such as its native habitat of stream banks and mucky soils, but this tree will also grow remarkably well on almost any soil, including heavy, compacted, or poorly-drained muck. It tolerates almost any soil condition except alkaline soils with a pH above 7.5.

Baldcypress trees can produce “knees,” which are knobby protrusions that grow from underground or
submerged roots. They’re called knees presumably because they resemble knees as much as they resemble anything else. Knees are more prone to develop in clay soils rather than silt or sand-based soils. Also, knees are more prone to develop on trees growing in water compared to trees growing on dry land. Where the knees are undesirable or cause problems, they can be sawed off below the soil surface without hurting the tree. Remove them as necessary.

It is a very important tree in the swampland ecosystem. It is valued for providing food and cover to wildlife. Swamp rabbits and other birds, such as Florida cranes and ducks, feed on baldcypress. White-tailed deer escape to the cover of baldcypress swamps during hunting season. Many animals find shelter in and around the base of large old-growth trees.

The baldcypress is hardy and can withstand temperatures below zero. It is also very long-lasting and can live up to 600 years. About 200 years are required for baldcypress stems to develop a high proportion of heartwood, renowned for its decay resistance.

People in both urban and rural areas can benefit from planting cypress. These trees can enhance the aesthetics and functioning of stormwater drainage systems. The best time to plant bare-root cypress seedlings is while they are dormant (November to March). Containerized cypress can be planted year-round.

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