
Wildflower Spot – January 2015
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

BALDCYPRESS

Taxodium distichum

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Baldcypress is a majestic, tall tree which drops its needle-leaves in the winter, leaving branchlets roughened by small buds. Nothing else resembles this tree, easily recognized in winter by its reddish-brown, peeling bark and cone-shaped “knees” that project from submerged roots, and the trunk is enlarged at the base.

Blooming March through April, the needles grow spirally on slender green twigs, crowded and featherlike. They are yellow-green in spring, becoming sage green in summer, and russet brown before falling. Both male and female flowers appear on the same tree. The male cones containing pollen droop in narrow clusters at the ends of branches. The female cones form at the ends of twigs, growing round and gray and somewhat woody, maturing in a year. They open in September and usually disintegrate.

Growing in very wet, swampy soils, often submerged and in pure stands, Baldcypress is found only in the Coastal Plain of Virginia. The range is from southern Dela-

ware to south Florida, west to south Texas and north to Oklahoma and Indiana. A related species, Pondcypress (*P. ascendens*) is known from only one location in Suffolk County. The knees are flattened and dome-shaped and the needles are awl-shaped, often ascending on the branches. A mature Pondcypress tree grows in the Teaching Marsh at Virginia Institute of Marine Science in Gloucester Point. Some taxonomists suggest these are two varieties, not two species.

A relative of the Redwood, Baldcypress is called the “wood eternal” because of the heartwood’s resistance to decay. One of the most valuable lumber trees, the straight-grained, durable wood is used for heavy construction, including docks, boats, bridges, as well as general millwork and interior trim. ❖



Photo: Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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