

The Swamp or Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*)

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(Most of the included information is obtained from several online sources.)

General Information:

The *Taxodium* genus consists of only two species, *Taxodium distichum*, the Swamp Cypress and *Taxodium ascendens*, the Pond Cypress. Both are suitable for bonsai cultivation though it is the Swamp Cypress that is more commonly seen. The Swamp Cypress is an upright, conical, monoecious, deciduous or semi-evergreen, coniferous tree found in swampy forests or by river margins. The Bald Cypress also grows well in relatively dry soils. Origins are in the United States and Mexico. The Bald Cypress tree grows from Texas to Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Florida and north to Massachusetts. In Louisiana the Cypress grows between 100 - 150 ft. and can live well over 1,000 years. The cypress is a deciduous tree which goes dormant as late as January, losing its leaves and branchlets. Some of the brown leaves will hang on all winter. The shoots are of two types; deciduous (without buds), which fall in the Autumn and persistent (with buds), from which only the leaves fall. The narrowly lance-shaped, pale green leaves to 2cm long are arranged alternatively, radially in two ranks. Male cones occur in groups; female cones are scattered throughout the tree. The trunk tends to be perfectly straight and develops a pale-brown, shallowly fissured bark texture with age. The wood of the cypress tree is very resistant to rot because it contains an oil, cypressene, which is stored in the wood. The Cypress also grows 'knees' which some believe the tree sends up from its roots for additional oxygen but a new belief is that these 'knees' are for supporting the tall tree in the soil. The Bald Cypress is a very popular bonsai tree. Not only because it is easy to grow, but because of its light, feathery-like leaves and its fall colors of orange-brown. It has a fast growth habit which is accelerated by hot summers

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Temperature: Zone 4-9, fully hardy to 14°F. Requires a consistent climate with hot summers for ideal growth; when planted in areas with cooler summers, growth is healthy but much slower. As a deciduous tree, this bonsai is healthiest when kept outdoors year-round. If your winters are severe, adequate protection from winter weather is essential; be sure to insulate the roots of your bonsai with an ample covering of leaves and needles and give it shelter from wind and extreme cold temperatures. The use of a cold frame or shed would be beneficial during dormancy. Use a humidity tray for indoor bonsai.

Lighting: Full sun. Should not need to be protected even during the hottest part of the day. Care must be given when in full sun not to let the tree dry out, as these are moisture-loving trees. Will tolerate low light conditions. Even though it prefers the outdoors, it makes a great indoor bonsai. If kept indoors it should be in a bright, sunny southern window until time for its winter dormancy and then placed in a cool environment.

Air:

Watering: Are you the type that over waters your bonsai? Then this is the tree for you. It loves to be in a swampy soil. If kept outdoors, you may have to water twice a day. You may even choose to submerge the pot in water for the time that you are away for any period of time during the summer months.

Fertilizing: pH: keep between 6.5 and 7.5. Fertilize your Bald Cypress tree once a week during the springtime with a week solution of at least 10-10-10. Taper off to once every two weeks during the late spring and fall (as dormancy approaches). Stop fertilizing as fall turns to winter, so your tree can go dormant until next spring. Once dormant, in late Winter, give a dose of 0-10-10.

Pruning / Training: Bald Cypress is a fast grower when in a warm climate, slower in cooler climates. If you trim and prune your tree too early in its life, it will develop a thin, straggly trunk. Therefore, it is important to let the tree grow for several years before cutting back. Because of this fast growth, great care must be taken when wiring. You must remove the wire before any damage occurs. You may find it easier to “pull” the branches down with raffia, wire, or even fish weights; attaching them to the rim of the pot or the trunk of the tree. These can be left on for a longer period of time and not cause damage. The best way to shape the tree is by pinching back the foliage anytime during spring and summer. To get a branch to thicken, let it grow for a season or two before cutting it back. If green branches are clipped too often, they may die back, allow a branch to become 'woody' before clipping. New growth will sprout at the place of your last pruning. Hard pruning can be carried out in late Winter; this commonly results in prolific budding from the trunk. One of the most notable assets of a Bald Cypress are “knees”. These are developed in nature when the roots protrude up through the soil. You can easily develop them by letting the tree become overgrown in its pot for an extra two to three years. Then you will have thicker roots in the pot that you can bring up through the soil when you repot. Let them stick up about 1/2 to 3/4 of an inch.

Insects / Pests: Mostly trouble free with a possible spider mite. The only disease you will probably encounter is twig blight where a stressed tree develops a fungus that will kill new branch tips. To prevent this, remove the dead tips. Since you may be watering this tree heavily or even in a bog like environment, you will tend to get fungus gnats. These are not harmful to the tree; they will just end up in your evening glass of wine.

Propagation: Cuttings at most times of the year, air layering in late spring and by seeds.