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Bald cypress a tree with knees

By Susan Yost

Special to the State News

Bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), a lovely tree with feathery foliage, is native to the southeastern U.S. and reaches the northern limit of its natural range in southern Delaware. This species helps exemplify the unique geographic and floristic position of Delaware, with its overlap of northern and southern plant species.

Well-known in southern "cypress swamps" like Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp, bald cypress also enhances the natural beauty of wetlands in southern Delaware like Trap Pond, Trussum Pond, Broad Creek and the James Branch, site of the Patriarch, a giant bald cypress about 540 years old and 33 feet in circumference at water level (according to "Delaware's Outstanding Natural Areas and Their

Garden Tales

Preservation," 1978, by Lorraine Fleming).

Unfortunately, in Delaware's intriguingly named "Great Cypress Swamp," many of the bald cypress trees were removed in the past by fire and logging.

The wood of bald cypress is so water-resistant that even prehistoric wood found in swamps may still be usable. Some uses for bald cypress wood are construction, fence posts, and shingles.

Why "bald"? This part of the common name comes from the tree's appearance in winter, when it loses its leaves (needles). Bald cypress is unusual in being a "deciduous conifer", unlike most of our other conifers (cone-bearing trees) which are evergreen. The scientific name "Taxodium" is Latin for

"yew-like".

In nature, bald cypress grows best in areas with intermittent flooding. The distinctive cypress "knees," rounded portions of the roots that stick up a few feet out of the water, may function to help support the tree, and were once hypothesized to provide oxygen to the roots.

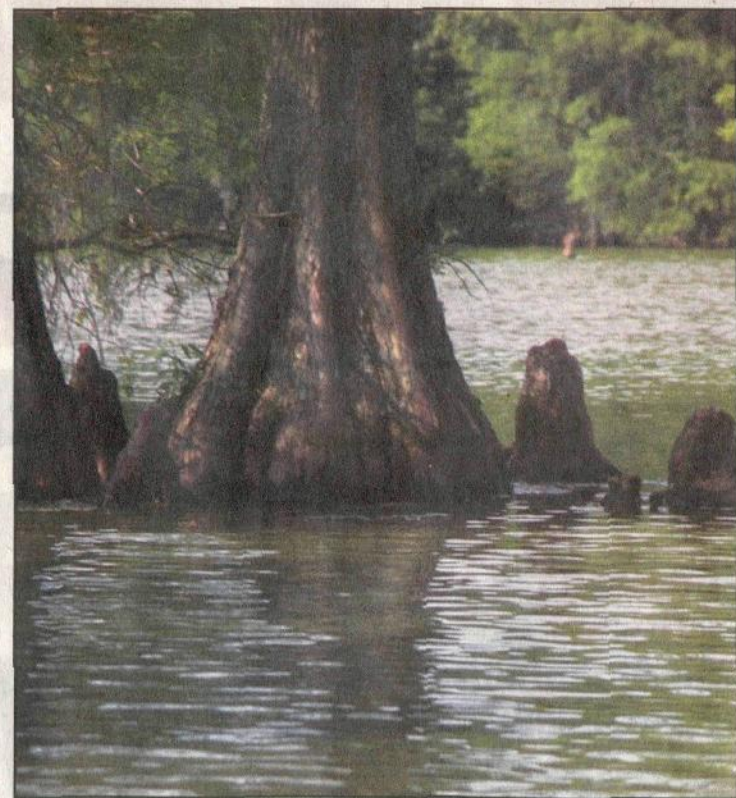
Surprisingly, you don't need a swamp in order to grow bald cypress. This popular ornamental tree can be planted even in well-drained soils, in addition to moist and poorly-drained soils, and grows approximately 100 feet in height. It has also been planted far north of its natural range, up to southern Canada.

It is hypothesized that the natural range of this species is restricted by ice damage to the seedlings (but not to more mature trees), and also competition of the seedlings with other vegetation on drier sites. Two

weeping forms of bald cypress are available, "Cascade Falls" and "Falling Waters." At Delaware State University, two large planted bald cypress trees can be seen on the Campus Tree Walk (for brochure and map, see <http://herbarium.desu.edu/services.htm>).

So, enjoy bald cypresses by canoeing or kayaking amongst the trees and knees at Trap or Trussum ponds, or plant one of these fine trees to enjoy in your yard.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.



Delaware State University/Michael Maciarelllo
Bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) trees with their distinctive "knees" at Trussum Pond in Sussex County.