

Presenting the 2007 SMA Tree of the Year

Baldcypress

by Michelle Buckstrup

Once the votes pointed to baldcypress (*Taxodium distichum*) for Tree of the Year 2007, I saw it everywhere here in upstate New York: in front of my dentist's office, at the entrance to my favorite nursery, on the golf course behind my client's house.

I was hyperconscious of baldcypress in Asheville, North Carolina, where thriving young baldcypresses form a U-shape around the historic downtown Grove Arcade. I saw a massive one in the Botanical Gardens at Asheville and a tiny bonsai-grove of them at the North Carolina Arboretum. Bold Spring Nursery sent us a baldcypress for our ceremonial tree planting on the Tuesday of the conference. I stood in awe before a double allée of them at Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden near Charlotte.

Every last tree I saw was in fantastic health. My appreciation for "BC" just grows and grows. I'm not alone, as the testimonials here attest. Thanks to all who contributed, including Ralph Sievert, who is respected as the "Johnny Appleseed" of baldcypresses. (Would that make him "Johnny Cypresscone"?)



Baldcypress fall color



A double allée of baldcypresses guides visitors from the parking lot to the main conservatory at Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden.

Baldcypress Quick Facts

Hardiness Zones: 3 to 11

Mature Height: 70 feet (21 m)

Mature Width: 20 feet (6 m)

BELOW: Baldcypress is considered slow to establish after transplanting, but once established, it's ironclad.

RIGHT: Baldcypresses limbed up for street tree use Photo: Ralph Sievert

BELOW RIGHT: The excurrent (upright central leader) structure of baldcypress helps it resist storm damage.



Baldcypress for Trivia Lovers

- The scientific name, *Taxodium distichum*, is a fusion of Latin and Greek: "Taxodium" means "like taxus," referring to the leaf appearance, and "distichum" means "in two ranks," referring to the leaf arrangement.
- Michael Dirr describes the vast native range of baldcypress as "Delaware to Florida, west to southern Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas."
- There's a little debate about where

the northernmost native stand of baldcypresses resides. Delaware's Trap Pond State Park claims that title for trees growing in its freshwater wetlands, but so does the Nature Conservancy's Battle Creek Cypress Swamp Sanctuary in Calvert County, Maryland. Road trip, anyone?

Baldcypress Trivia Continued...

- In Italian, baldcypress is cipresso delle paludi (“cypress of the wetland”). In Spanish, baldcypress is ciprés de los pantanos (“cypress of the bog”). In French, baldcypress is cyprès chauve (“cypress that is bald”).
- Some ethnobotany sites list baldcypress cone-resin as an analgesic for wounds.
- Baldcypress is one of the few conifers that responds well to coppicing (hacking back hard in the spring), if one would, for some odd reason, want to do that.
- Cypress “knees” are known more technically as pneumatophores (Latin for “breathing structures”). They are hypothesized to assist the tree in obtaining oxygen during flooded conditions.
- Baldcypress and dawn redwood are in the same taxonomic family, recognized as Cupressaceae by some, but having been changed to Taxodiaceae by the Arnold Arboretum and others. (See “The Names They Are A-Changin’,” *City Trees*, March/April 2005).
- Baldcypress is the state tree of Louisiana.
- Baldcypress lovers must see the movie “Ulee’s Gold,” set in the cypress and tupelo swamps of Florida.
- Baldcypress are conifers, yet shed their needles in the fall. In this regard they are deciduous conifers with the added peculiarity of dropping needle-bearing twigs in fall. This gives the winter cypress a ‘bald’ appearance. Both needles and twigs are regenerated in the spring.

BOTTOM: Baldcypresses grow naturally in groves, and many urban foresters imitate nature when planting them.

BELOW: Baldcypress leaves are arranged in an alternate, spiraling fashion.



Baldcypress Testimonials

I’m thrilled to see *Taxodium distichum* receive the well-deserved respect and notoriety it will earn as SMA’s Tree of the Year. As I’ve traveled North America (always looking at trees regardless of the purpose of my trip), I’ve been amazed at the range of this “southern” tree. Baldcypress performs admirably in hot or cold and wet or dry regions, and makes it look easy, thanks to its sturdy structure and rapid growth. I love the fine texture and unusual fall color, and it tolerates tight spaces above or below ground without causing significant infrastructure damage. Finally, when it sheds its needles each autumn, it gives me a chance to educate easily entertained friends and residents about the semantics of trees... evergreen vs. deciduous, conifer vs. pine, etc. That’s scintillating party talk! I like baldcypress so much, it’s the tree I chose to plant outside my own office window. And don’t overlook the cousin to baldcypress, pond cypress (*Taxodium ascendens*). It’s a wonderful tree too.

Steve Cothrel
Superintendent of Parks and Forestry
City of Upper Arlington, Ohio

I like baldcypress because you can dress it up or dress it down as needed for each planting situation. What I mean is you can let the lower branches remain on the tree in plantings that are out in open spaces, or you can skirt the branches up for street tree use. As an example, we had to remove a hazardous tree next to a large pond in one of the towns parks. We replaced it with a 20-foot-tall (6-m) baldcypress that was tree-spaded from Maryland. It’s fully branched to the ground and looks great next to the water. By contrast, we had a developer plant several baldcypresses as street trees that have been limbed up. I’m looking forward to seeing these mature. We will also be installing baldcypresses in a median as part of a new road construction project.

Jay Banks
Urban Forester
Town of Leesburg, Virginia

A tree that is native to swampland yet survives and thrives on the high plains deserves some recognition in my book. Honestly, "tree of merit" is an understatement with baldcypress given its adaptability, unique structure, and rooting characteristics. What other tree can you group around a small-acreage pond yet also utilize in a windbreak or screening planting along a sandy upland site? I know, you might have a tendency to pick *Ailanthus* or Siberian elm, but baldcypress just might be a better choice.

It has been my experience that structurally, apart from the oaks, this tree has few comparisons given its strong branch attachments, lack of codominance, and very little, if any, decay issues. Spider mites and occasional bagworms are the only insects that come to mind. Iron chlorosis can be a problem, but that is more an issue of tree-to-site selection and not necessarily a limiting factor for the species.

Baldcypress works fine as a street tree or park planting, but the real opportunity is to plant this species in groups and groves—

the "G&G" concept we need to use more of in urban and community forestry. Plant baldcypress in a group, water the first couple years, then walk away. No pruning, no insect or disease control, and typically no maintenance needs. What other species can you say that about? The biggest challenge with this species is leaf drop during drought and the phone calls it generates. More than one "dead" tree has been cut down in this situation, I am sure.

Eric Berg
Community Forestry Program Leader
Lincoln, Nebraska

Baldcypress is, without a doubt, one of the most versatile large trees we have added to our cityscape program. While it grows tall over the years and is a fairly fast grower, the wood isn't weak, so breakage and limb pickup is minimal. Planted in open fields and border areas, it provides a wonderful definition to any treeline, and as a specimen tree, it is beyond compare.

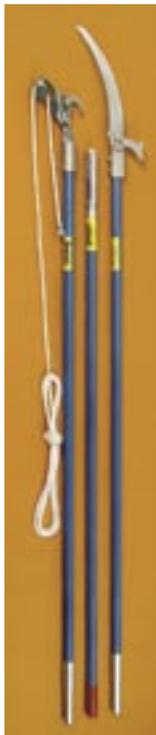
It has a grace and style all its own, being

an elongated pyramid of bright green fern-like color each spring and mellowing into a solid green hue throughout the summer. Autumn sees it with its characteristic golden needles dropping gently to the turf, leaving nothing to clean up except a few cones, since the delicate texture of the needles disintegrates swiftly and mulches back into the soil easily. Its winter form is stunning as well, with reddish brown fibrous bark over a strong trunk that supports its graceful, horizontal branches.

We have added baldcypress to our city parks in both wet and dry field areas to provide more diversity and to reintroduce native species back into our ecosystems. Not only are they surviving in these settings, they are thriving! We look forward to adding baldcypress to our boulevard zones in the near future, to expand our environmental quality and soften the look of these regions of our fair city.

Kathy Keeney
City Arborist
City of Paducah, Kentucky

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Up until about eight years ago, the use of baldcypress as a street tree in our program was limited to moist roadside areas, pond edges, or residential streets that have permanent lawn irrigation systems. It performed admirably for us under these conditions, but often floundered as a street tree.

However, road design modifications to median and roadside soils that alleviated soil compaction have allowed tree roots to penetrate into a horizon of moist soils. That has increased our ability to use baldcypress in raised, un-irrigated roadway medians. Under these conditions, the tree grows rapidly once established, averaging four to six feet (1.8 m) of growth annually. One-and-a-half inch (3.8-cm) caliper baldcypresses planted in 2001 are now nearly ten inches (25 cm) in diameter.

This species requires relatively small inputs of maintenance compared to other canopy trees in our inventory. Initially there were public reservations about the use of the tree—due, primarily, to its deciduous nature (folks here like leaves on the trees in the winter). However, its annual display of color in the fall lasts well into January, and buds usually break by the first week of March.

Baldcypress provides four seasons of interest, excellent wind resistance, wildlife habitat and food, and is relatively litter- and pest-free. It has, thus far, shown to be fairly benign to hardscape infrastructure compared to other species in similar growing conditions. Given the aforementioned soil remediation, a row of baldcypresses planted on 30-foot (9-m) centers compares favorably to the overused canopy species in our area. That may lead to less reliance on these species in the future by the community.

David Godson

Forester, Sarasota County, Florida Forestry Program

My love affair with baldcypress began over 25 years ago in Dover, Ohio. As an urban forester with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), it was my job to consult with municipalities about urban forestry pro-



TOP: The fall color of the straight species of baldcypress is a russet-orange-gold.

ABOVE: A bonsai baldcypress grove at the North Carolina Arboretum

grams. Since I lived in Dover, I served as the voluntary chairman of the Dover Shade Tree Commission. This provided me with a place to experiment and provide examples for other cities to learn from.

At that time, the ODNR would sell seedlings to municipalities. These young trees were ideal for establishing a small nursery. I convinced the local cemetery director to let me have a portion of the city cemetery to set up a nursery. As soon as I could, I promptly filled it with baldcypress.

My interest in baldcypress started when I heard Bob Skiera talk about using them in Milwaukee. After having my awareness raised, I began noticing them all over northeast Ohio. It was not uncommon to see them in front yards, on school grounds, and in municipal cemeteries.

Their success in Wisconsin meant that baldcypress were emphatically cold hardy, but for other reasons, they seem to be the perfect large-maturing urban tree. A central stem with perpendicularly attached branches make for inherent storm resistance and a formal pyramidal shape. They are fast growing and easily pruned. Textbooks describe their natural ability to withstand hurricane-force winds. Their compound leaves are a vibrant green and lend a unique feathery appearance to the tree. While fall color is not a big selling point, I describe it as copper russet.

Just two years after I established my Dover nursery, it was time to use the baldcypresses before they got too large. Being an energetic young fellow, I would spend Saturdays digging the young trees out of the nursery's heavy clay soil. While I tried to keep soil on the roots, they almost always ended up as bare root transplants. After severing a prominent taproot, there wasn't much of a root system left, but amazingly, I don't recall losing one tree that I transplanted.

These young trees were moved to Dover's residential tree lawns, parks, and other city properties. The most noticeable plantings grace East Third Street, one of Dover's older residential thoroughfares. I even managed to get groupings of them planted at the entryway to the city where Interstate 77 and State Route 39

intersect. Today these early plantings are spectacular specimens that lend a unique aesthetic quality to the immediate surroundings.

In the mid-1980s I left the ODNR to become the city forester in Cleveland, Ohio. Working with a modest budget for tree planting, I was able to plant baldcypresses as I saw fit. These were typically B&B trees that were purchased from nearby commercial nurseries, and they were no larger than two-inch (5-cm) caliper.

Like many large cities, Cleveland had many streets that were totally devoid of trees. Those with sufficient space were ideally suited for baldcypress plantings. The earliest plantings were done in 1987 along West 187th Street. Today these trees are among the best examples of a street lined with baldcypress.

When I arrived in Minneapolis as the director of forestry for the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, I learned that the palette of trees to choose from was quite limited compared to the choices in Ohio. I assumed baldcypress would not survive this far north; to my surprise, I was wrong. Observing the few established baldcypress trees in Minneapolis prompted us to do several test plantings on park properties. The results of trees planted over five years ago are good. However, the real test will be a typical Minnesota winter where the temperature stays well below zero for weeks at a time. Thus far, this has not happened.

When Dutch Elm Disease hit Minneapolis over 30 years ago, over 90% of all street trees were American Elms. A popular replacement tree was the ash, so much so, that there are about 40,000 ash street trees in Minneapolis. Now, as Emerald Ash Borer threatens us, we are constantly looking for new trees to incorporate into our urban forest. Baldcypress may prove to be one of those new trees. However, for many cities, it has already been tested and approved. If you are in a hardiness zone where baldcypress does well, do not hesitate to use it. I can assure you that you won't be disappointed.

Ralph Sievert
Director of Forestry
Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board



TOP: The ability to withstand periodic standing water is a major asset of baldcypress. Photo: Steve Cothrel

ABOVE: A massive baldcypress trunk, creekside at the University of North Carolina Botanic Gardens in Asheville.

Baldcypress is a species with much to recommend it as SMA's Tree of the Year. Some of the oldest parks in the Vancouver area have truly superb specimens that have developed

their knees. Some might consider the odd appearance of the knees a nuisance, but this is easily dealt with through raising mower heights or through fencing of garden areas that contain the older specimens. While this species will survive in poor, compacted soils, and develops the best knees in thinner soil near water, it really performs well in our area in deep fertile soils associated with many of our park gardens.

Baldcypress is often compared to *Metasequoia*; however, I recommend *Taxodium* as a focal point or single specimen in park gardens primarily because it's shorter and more quickly develops a pleasing, rounded crown with soft, feathery foliage. In winter, and especially where they emerge from water, baldcypress trees create a singularly attractive scene.

Douglas Justice,
Associate Director and Curator of Collections
University of British Columbia
Botanical Garden & Centre for Plant Research

For arborists in the humid Deep South, *Taxodium distichum* is a beloved tree that transcends its native swampy ecosystem and thrives in tightly kept urban centers. It has proven to be a strong urban tree that stands tall and proud in the face of drought and flooding, pollution, heat, and humidity. Baldcypress can be seen planted in the small city squares of sleepy southern towns, but I have been especially impressed with its use in Tallahassee, Florida, where the tree is planted in copious numbers. In Tallahassee, baldcypress drips with Spanish moss in shopping mall parking lots, and it has the magic to make strip malls seem like cozy places to take breakfast.

Far out of range of its native habitat, it greets the southerner astray on the streets of Philadelphia. Oh, the delight of seeing the beloved baldcypress planted streetside where it is surrounded by and competing with towering buildings. Here, baldcypress grows without the exotic trappings of Spanish moss, and here the tree surprises by thriving in polluted, cold urban canyons.

Hillary Barber,
Bold Spring Nursery, Monroe, GA 