

Kentucky Champion Tree Program

by Diana Olszowy

Baldcypress - Kentucky's Only Native Deciduous Evergreen

Is that right -- deciduous evergreen? Isn't that an oxymoron? Actually, no. There are conifers (cone-bearing trees) that lose their needles. A good example is one of Kentucky's native conifers, the baldcypress. It is naturally found along large streams and swamps and will basically grow anywhere with slow-moving water. It is best known as the iconic species found in the Florida Everglades and is a resident of many bayous along the Gulf Coast Plains from Florida to Texas, along the estuaries of the Atlantic Coastal Plain to Delaware, and into the Mississippi River Valley. Baldcypress can be found as far north as southern Indiana and Illinois. In Kentucky, baldcypress is found in the extreme western region of the state-specifically in the swampy environments.

Kentucky's state champion baldcypress is located smack-dab in the middle of a Ballard County slough. It is a magnificent specimen measuring 302 inches in circumference (that's over 25 feet around) and towering to a whopping 128 feet in height. This ginormous tree also holds the crown for being the largest champion of all of Kentucky's 100 champion trees.

Since baldcypress often grows in standing water, it has developed a specialized rooting capability called a "knee." These knees vary from several inches to more than 10 feet in height, depending upon the average water level of the site. The knees anchor the tree in the soft, wet soil, and the buttressed roots develop into such an extensive mass of roots that even hurricane-force winds rarely overturn these trees. They grow best in full sun and acidic soil and can tolerate both wet and dry conditions. Young baldcypress grow very quickly, averaging 3-4 feet in height annually, but once the taproot reaches the water table, the tree will begin to slow down its growth rate. Baldcypress average 50-70 feet in height with a crown spread of 20-30 feet and is considered an extremely long-lived species, commonly reaching 400-600 years of age.

Baldcypress is a very attractive tree with a four-season appeal. It's soft-looking, bright green needles are stunning against its shaggy,

cinnamon-colored bark. In the fall, the fern-like foliage turns bright copper and drops from the tree to form a carpet of soft needles.

Baldcypress cones turn from green to brownish purple in late fall and are produced annually, with bumper crops every 3-5 years. The seeds are eaten by turkeys, squirrels, wood ducks and other waterfowl, and wading birds. The trees are often utilized by bald eagles, osprey, and several varieties of warblers as nesting sites, and catfish utilize the submerged roots as spawning sites.

Baldcypress wood has a multitude of uses and is highly valued for its decay resistance. It is sought out for construction of boats, docks, and bridges and is the source of the popular cypress mulch. Since baldcypress can thrive in low-oxygenated soils, it has become a popular tree in the home landscape. It tolerates compacted clay soils and will make an excellent street tree if given ample room to grow. If you have a site in your yard where water has a tendency to sit, consider planting a baldcypress there. You can tell your friends and neighbors about your own "deciduous evergreen" and let them scratch their heads and think about that for awhile.



This baldcypress, found in Ballard County, is the largest of all Kentucky champion trees. (Left) The foliage is similar to that of the redwoods.

Left photo courtesy: Chris Evans, River to River CWMA, Bugwood.org; Above: Kentucky Division of Forestry



These baldcypress are growing in Kentucky Ridge State Forest in Bell County. The "knees" shown help stabilize the tree in wet areas.

Photo courtesy: Diana Olszowy

About the Author:

Diana Olszowy is Stewardship and Education Branch Manager with the Kentucky Division of Forestry. She is also an editor of the Kentucky Woodlands Magazine. Kentucky Division of Forestry, 627 Comanche Trail, Frankfort, KY 40601; Phone: 502.564.4496; Fax: 502.564.6553; E-mail: diana.olszowy@ky.gov