

# THE BONSAI Wire

April 2019

The Newsletter of The Greater New Orleans Bonsai Society

## FROM THE President



We were delighted to have Brussel Martin as our guest bonsai artist in March. As you

know, Brussel is the owner of Brussels' Bonsai Nursery in Olive Branch Mississippi, one of the largest bonsai nurseries in the United States – if not THE largest! Brussel presented a demonstration and lecture on Japanese Black Pine in the “Bunjin” style. Below is a photograph of the tree before the work began. Brussel



talked about the key ideas and concepts behind the bunjin style and spoke at length about candle pruning and the timing of it in our climate zone. Following is a photo of the tree after a couple of hours of work



President cont.  
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## MEETINGS & Events

*Note: Study Groups are for signed up participants. Programs are open to ALL members.*

### Tuesday, April 9, 2019

**Intermediate Study Group (for signed up participants) 6:00pm-7:15pm**

**Program: How to Select Material for Bonsai 7:30pm**

GNOBS President Randy Bennett will lecture (with examples) on how to evaluate and select the best raw material for bonsai.

*Bonus: Nursery stock material used as examples will be raffled off at the end of the meeting*

### Tuesday, May 14, 2019

**Intermediate Study Group (for signed up participants) 6:00pm-7:15pm**

**Program: Open Workshop 7:30pm**

Bring your own tree(s) to work on during the meeting. More experienced members will be available to assist you with styling and to answer questions.

### Thursday, May 16, 2019

**Azalea Study Group - 7:00pm- 9:00pm**

Jefferson Parish East Bank Regional Library, 4747 West Napoleon Ave., Metairie, LA 70001  
Free species based study group. Sign up at the regular meeting or contact Randy Bennett for more information.

### Tuesday, June 11, 2019

**Intermediate Study Group (for signed up participants) 6:00pm-7:15pm**

**Program: Tropical Show-and-Tell 7:30pm**

Bring your tropical bonsai to display. Members will then share information on their trees and a panel will offer advice and growing tips.

### Saturday, June 22, 2019

**Black Pine Study Group 9:00am - 12:00Noon**

1816 Fairfax Ave, Metairie, LA 70003 (Randy's house)

Discussion and hands-on activity will be candle-pruning

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Meetings take place at the **Marine Corps League Hall, 2708 Delaware St., Kenner, LA**. For more information, articles and everything bonsai, check us out on our website at [www.gnobs.org](http://www.gnobs.org)

[facebook.com/NewOrleansBonsai](https://facebook.com/NewOrleansBonsai) [gnobs.org](http://gnobs.org)

# SPECIES Spotlight

## Bald Cypress as Bonsai (Part 1) (General Information About the Species)

by Randy Bennett

*The following is the first in a series of articles on bald cypress as bonsai*

*Vaughn Banting's famous bald cypress bonsai*



What species of tree could be more iconic as subject matter for bonsai in the deep south than the bald cypress? We all appreciate their beauty and majesty. Whether you admire it as a mature specimen in a suburban neighborhood or while driving along I-10 through the swamp, the bald cypress is a beautiful and unique species.

### Some Atypical Characteristics of Bald Cypress

One of their unique characteristics is the upper canopy, which broadens and flattens out as they mature, often referred to as “flat-top” cypress.

Another unique feature of bald cypress is the fluted and buttressed base that they develop as they begin to mature. While this characteristic will develop in landscape specimens, it is much more pronounced in the swamp. The fluted and buttressed bases



will begin to develop in trees when they are fairly young – about 10 years of age. The buttressing will increase with age and the degree of fluting multiply as well during the first 20 to 30 years of growth.

Bald cypress are best known for their characteristic “knees” that often develop in the landscape as well as the swamp.



But before we get into bald cypress as bonsai, I think it important to relate some general information and facts about this unique species. Bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) is a deciduous conifer native to the swampy areas of the southern United States. The trees grow straight and tall, reaching an average height of about 100 feet, though some may get as tall as 150 feet.

Although there are exceptions, which I will discuss later, it takes about 100 years for a bald cypress to mature and reach 100 feet or so in height. After about 200 years, it will have reached its maximum height and will have developed a fully mature flat-top shape with minimal branches underneath the canopy and a typical diameter of about three feet. Most of the

lower branches will have been sacrificed in the swamp forest environment in favor of the flat-top canopy. That canopy acts like a giant solar-panel.

They live, on average, about 600 years, though few of those ancient giants exist today. There have been cypress discovered that were about 1,200 years old, but that is exceedingly rare. Those that do are much larger than what we typically see, such as the one pictured below. It is believed that the tree pictured below is actually two bald cypress that grew together. Or, perhaps it was a twin trunk cypress to begin with. Such trees were passed over by logging crews as defective since the trunk is not entirely straight. Bald cypress were heavily harvested in the south for lumber and few grand old specimens exist today. When trees are harvested for lumber, the stumps will sprout as long as the trees were less than 60 years old. After 60 years, they are loathe to begin again.



Only a handful of such specimens still exist.

Bald cypress are known for yielding lumber that does not rot. However, this is only true of mature trees. It takes many years for a tree to develop enough of the rosin to prevent the wood from rotting. But trees cut 200 years ago that sunk in rivers, swamps and lakes as they were being taken to mills are highly prized today – when they can be found. These “sinker cypress” show little to no rot after a hundred years of being submerged under water and lying in the mud.

The leaves (needles) of the bald cypress are small and frond-like, usually hanging down and measuring from three to six inches in length. They alternate along shoots and in bonsai culture, leaf length can be reduced to about an inch to an inch and a half when proper pinching techniques are applied.

The taxonomy of the *Taxodium* genus is highly debated. There is a similar cypress, called the pond or upland cypress. It is smaller and more prevalent in the southeastern part of the United States. It is classed as *Taxodium distichum* var. *imbricatum* and sometimes may be classified as *T. ascendens*. The pond cypress is virtually indistinguishable from the bald cypress until you look at the foliage. The leaves of the pond cypress are more thread-like in appearance. In Georgia and Florida particularly, you can find numerous areas

where the bald and pond cypress have hybridized, yielding characteristics of both species. The other cypress that is closely related to the bald and pond cypress is the Montezuma or Mexican cypress (*Taxodium mucronatum*). It is native to the southwestern part of the United States, Mexico and



Guatemala. It is even shorter when mature and has leaves that are much shorter as well. Its cones are larger and it rarely produces knees, even when growing in very wet environments.

The seed cones of the bald cypress are green and globular

in shape, averaging about an inch and a half in diameter. Each cone can hold anywhere from 2 to 32 seeds, but they typically average about 16 seeds per cone.



### Pests and Diseases of Bald Cypress

#### Galls

One thing people often do is to confuse seed cones with galls. The photo at right shows the globular-shaped seed cones and the photo below depicts galls.

Seed cones form at the end of branches while galls form on leaves and are much smaller. Galls on your cypress



#### Baldcypress Twig Gall (Midge Fly)



are nothing to worry about. They are caused by an insect called the cypress gall midge. The female midge fly will lay her eggs at the tip of a

shoot before it opens. Then, as the leaf opens and elongates, the leaf cells encapsulate the eggs, forming the gall. The galls are usually small, about the size of a dime or nickel. Once the

eggs hatch inside the gall, the larvae feeds on the gall tissue. The larvae pupate into new cypress midge flies, which hatch from the galls in November when the galls turn brown and fall from the tree.

The best way to deal with this problem on your bonsai is to simply remove the gall by pinching it off of the leaf and throwing it away.

### Cypress Beetles

The cypress beetle is a very small insect whose body is covered with dark markings and has a yellow head. They are about the size of a small ant. They will usually attack trees near the apex, feeding on new leaves. More often than not, they do minimal damage to a tree. However, if you encounter them on your bonsai, treat with an insecticide labeled to be effective on cypress beetles.

### Mites



There are two different types of mites that feed on bald cypress. The spider mite and the rust mite. Both have very sharp mouth parts. They will use these to pierce the leaves and drain them of fluids. As the fluids are consumed, the leaves become pale and turn yellow.

If you have yellowing foliage, you

can determine whether or not mites are the cause by taking a sheet of white paper, holding it under the yellow foliage, then tapping the foliage with your hand. Mites are barely visible with the naked eye and rust mites are so small that you will need a 10X magnifying glass to see them.

If you determine that you have mites, avoid using an oil spray and opt for a miticide such as dicofol or kelthane. Bald cypress are sensitive to dormant oil sprays and summer oil applications. Do not use oil sprays on bald cypress. You can also use any of the insecticidal soaps available.

### Chlorosis and Not Enough Water

Other causes for yellowing leaves may be chlorosis or insufficient watering. Some people growing bald cypress as bonsai forget where they are most happy – in the swamp. We think because we are growing them as bonsai that they need to be in your typical bonsai soil. While they can certainly thrive in such a soil, we forget how quickly bonsai soil dries out and insufficient watering can cause the tree to go into stress with the result being the yellowing of foliage. Make sure that the soil in which your bald cypress bonsai is growing stays wet, or at least damp. Do not let the soil dry out.

Chlorosis is caused by an iron deficiency. And guess what the main cause of that happens to be – poor soil that lacks proper nutrients. A secondary cause can be the trees' inability to absorb the nutrients it needs. Chlorosis on bald

cypress occurs on new foliage rather than foliage that already exists. As the new growth emerges, it is distinctly yellowed and is usually stunted in growth. The simplest solution is to add coffee grounds or peat moss to your bonsai soil. Both will increase acidity (which bald cypress love). And remember, you will not create a problem by adding either of these ingredients to your existing soil since bald cypress thrive in very wet conditions. Another option, though with only short-term results is to treat the soil with a soil acidifier or chelated iron.

### Blight

Bald cypress can be affected by several forms of needle or leaf blight. All forms of “blight” are fungal problems. You can recognize it by brown to black spots on the foliage and even on young branch shoots. Twig blight is typically caused by a lack of water. Are you seeing a pattern here? Twig blight can be made worse by exposure to direct sunlight or low temperatures. If you are experiencing twig blight, move your cypress to a shady location and give it plenty of water. You should prune away any branches that are infected. Make sure that the infected branches are disposed of, then place your pruning tool in a solution of 1 part bleach and nine parts water for about a minute. You can also use Lysol spray for disinfecting your tools. For leaf fungus, use any of the fungicides recommended for use on bald cypress.

### Fall Webworms



Fall webworms are caterpillars that hide in the bark, you will know they are present when you see a web over the bark and/or foliage. The adult form is a moth that is white in color. She lays hundreds of eggs on the underside of cypress leaves. Once the eggs hatch, the worms can do a lot of damage in a short amount of time, so when you see evidence of them, you will need to treat infected areas with an insecticide for caterpillars. However, before you treat, you will need to remove the webs. The webs repel water and so, if not removed, the insecticide may simply run off of the infected area without harming the caterpillars.

### Bagworms

We have all seen bagworms. A bagworm is a female

caterpillar that lives in a bag that it builds out of plant debris. She lays her eggs in the bag and they hatch in the spring. As the larvae leave the bag in spring, they form their own bags, slowly moving about the cypress feeding on the foliage. Because they are so clearly visible, the best way to deal with them on your bonsai is simply to remove them by hand and drop them in a bucket of soapy water.



### Scale

Bald cypress can also be susceptible to scale. The small, brown, dome-shaped scales will form on twigs and young branches in the spring. They will sometimes form on leaves as well. Most treatments recommend using an oil spray to



kill them. However, since cypress are not tolerant of oil sprays, the best method is to simply remove them with your fingernail. If you check your trees daily, you can eliminate them before it becomes an all-out infestation.

### Soil Requirements

Bald cypress require a soil that is acidic and at the very least, neutral. They will not survive in an alkaline soil. They will adapt to soils with a wide range of components, but are happiest in soils with a great deal of organic matter. You can find bald cypress growing in many parts of the country and in a wide range of soils. They do not require wet soils to grow. They can grow in heavy, clay or mucky soils. But they will also grow in compacted, garden-like loamy soils and even drier, sandy soils. This speaks well of their adaptability. But... look where they grow in nature. And where do we find the most healthy, long-lived specimens? The soil and environment of the swamp.

The “soil” in the swamp is composed of thousands of

years of decayed leaf matter and trees that have died and rotted. Their roots are under water most, if not all, of the year. They thrive in these conditions.

In bonsai culture, they adapt easily to a 50/50 mix of organic and aggregate material, as long as they receive adequate water. I grow my cypress in Miracle-Grow Potting Mix, with no aggregate. I feel it is vital that the roots stay wet. I also will set smaller bald cypress bonsai in trays or tubs of water during the hottest months, with the rim of the pot slightly above the level of water. When cypress are not getting enough water, you will see browning of the foliage, indicating that the tree is under stress.

It is not my intent to criticize the soil mix used by anyone growing bald cypress bonsai. I am only relating what I do and why. Can they grow and be happy in bonsai soil mixes? Certainly!... as long as they get enough water. However, I don't want to put my cypress under unnecessary stress in the heat of summer and I am interested in growing cypress knees and keeping them in scale with the tree.

I'm not talking about bending small roots in half, wiring them together and extending them above the soil surface to simulate a knee. (This actually occurs naturally among certain species and is called a “looping root”.) I'm talking about actually growing cypress knees. I do not know if anyone else has successfully grown cypress knees in bonsai culture. I would assume there are others who have done so. I have simply never seen anyone write about it. I will elaborate on the method I use to grow knees in Part 5 of this series.

### Light Requirements

Bald cypress like exposure to full sun. However, keep this in mind; more shallow pots means that the soil heats up and ceramic containers can become hot to the touch in full sun. Both of these factors can cause roots to become hot as well. This can affect their function and can inhibit the transport of moisture and nutrients. The result is that the entire tree becomes stressed and visibly manifests itself in the browning of the foliage.

If your cypress shows signs of stress, you have several options: move it into the shade, cover the soil surface with wet, long-fiber sphagnum moss, increase misting, increase the amount of water it receives, or all of the above. Remember, you cannot overwater a bald cypress!





After pruning, wiring and repotting



Following Brussels' lecture/demo Friday night, he conducted a workshop Saturday morning on some very nice Japanese Black Pine pre-bonsai stock that he brought down from his nursery.



# Bonsai Tips for April

by Randy Bennett

By this time in south Louisiana, everything has leafed out. If not, you better check your tree as it may not be coming back. And if such is the case, take the time to find out why. First, lightly scrape the bark on a shoot to see if the cambium layer is green or not. If you see green, you are probably alright and the tree is just getting a slow start. If not, then it probably died from root rot. To be certain, remove it from the pot and begin exposing the roots. Look for roots that are black instead of light tan to dark brown. See if the roots have the odor of decay. If such is the case, then you are most likely overwatering your trees.

Do not be in a hurry to prune new growth. The tree must be allowed to push out new shoots and leaves. Unless your tree is in the "growth for maintenance" stage, allow new growth to elongate and leaves to harden off before beginning to prune back, in this way, you are not exhausting the tree of its food reserves before new growth has a chance to begin replenishing the food stores.

Now is the time to begin applying insecticides and fungicides, particularly to trees such as crepe myrtles, which, in many cases, have already begun to show signs of aphids. If you are hesitant about what type of insecticide to use, apply an insecticidal soap, such as Safers'.

Check any wire applied over the winter on a daily basis. This time of year, trees put on significant growth and wires can cut into the bark before you realize it. And usually, by the time you do realize it... it's too late and the damage has been done.

Begin to rotate your trees so that all your new growth gets the benefit of full sun.

You can begin to increase the amount of water your trees receive. However, don't get carried away. Monitor your soil and the amount of moisture in it.

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## Saturday, June 15, 2019

Creating Bonsai from Garden Center Stock  
City Park Botanical Garden 9:00am - 12:00Noon

Jim Osborne will conduct a three hour hands on workshop on bonsai basics. Workshop participants will create a juniper bonsai. Some of the more experienced GNOBS members will be assisting. Cost for the workshop (which includes the juniper and wire) is \$35. For more information or to sign up, visit the Botanical Garden's website (in the calendar section).

<http://neworleanscitypark.com/calendar/category/garden>



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