

Bald Cypress as Bonsai (Part 2)

(Typical Designs for Bald Cypress Bonsai)

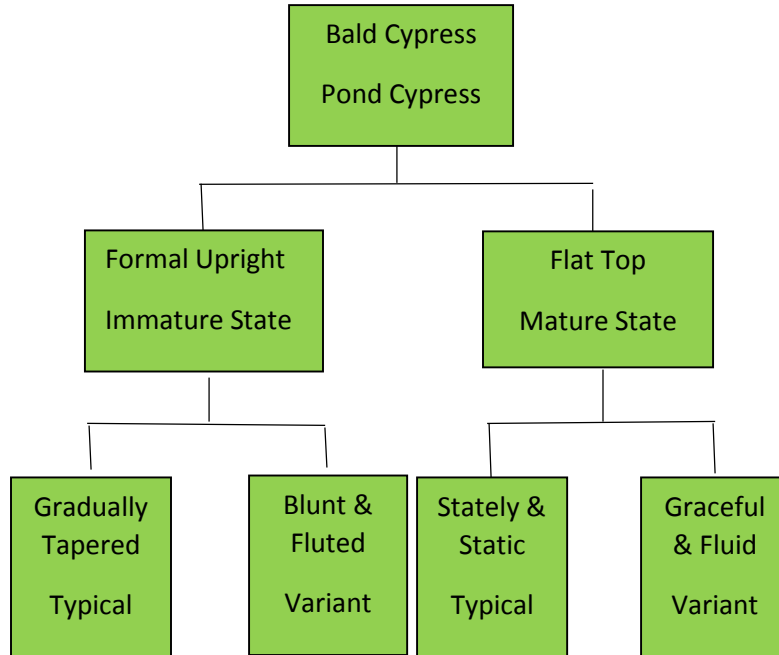
By Randy Bennett

VAUGHNS' MODEL FOR POSSIBLE TRUNK DESIGNS FOR CREATING BALD CYPRESS BONSAI

As we begin to think about bald cypress as a subject for bonsai, we need to think carefully and consider other growth habits of the species before coming to a decision regarding style.

I was fortunate to have Vaughn Banting as one of my teachers and mentors. He spent many years studying the growth patterns of bald cypress. I too, have spent many years studying cypress, documenting their growth patterns as their canopies flatten out, as well as collecting and growing them as bonsai.

For the purposes of designing bald cypress as bonsai, Vaughn offered the following analysis in a program guide for BCI in '93.



In the "Formal Upright", or immature state, the tree has a conical shape, typical of a Christmas tree. And this form can be found in nature, most often as a tall, slender, gradually tapering tree. The branches of this form angle upward and continue to do so until the tree begins to reach a

more mature state. As the tree matures, the outer two thirds of the long lower branches begin to arch downward from the weight.

In addition to the typical formal upright, immature form, it also exists as, what Vaughn referred to, as a “blunt and fluted variant”. The blunt and fluted variant is a short, squat, formal upright cypress that has the buttressed and fluted base, typical of large cypress, but is very short. An excellent example of this can be seen in a small pond within the city limits of Alexandria, Louisiana, on Hwy 28. There are several bald cypress with massive, fluted bases, measuring four to six feet in diameter but only 10-15 feet tall. You will often see bonsai created after this type of variant to best illustrate the Formal Upright style. You can see several famous examples of this in some of the bonsai photos below.



Formal Upright, immature cypress in the typical, gradually tapered form

On the “Flat Top” side, he describes the more typical flat top as being “stately and static”, while the “graceful and fluid” structure is a seldom seen variant. The “stately and static” form embodies a perfectly straight trunk line. This is the form that is most often observed. The “graceful and fluid” form possesses a trunk line that has slight movement in it. Although there are occasionally instances where cypress can be found growing in a slant style, this is extremely rare and, more often than not, is a result of the tree being slightly uprooted from a severe storm and does not represent a natural growth pattern.

Somewhere, around the 100 year mark, the conical-shaped juvenile form of the bald cypress begin to change shape as they transition into a more mature form.

What is often seen, especially on very old cypress, are flat-tops trees with hollow trunks, trees where the apex has died or broken off during a storm and a new apex has formed and trees with severe shari extending down the trunk. Jin is also very common on mature bald cypress. The photo below shows an old cypress by Catahoula Lake, in central Louisiana. Its appearance has changed little during the past 40 years.



Venerable old cypress at Catahoula Lake

Below are examples of cypress grown as bonsai which typifies some of the growth patterns in trees of the “chokkan” or formal upright style of bonsai.



Immature “Blunt & Fluted” Variant Form



Another of Vaughn’s Bald Cypress Bonsai in “chokkan” style

Immature “Gradually Tapered” Typical Form



Bill Valavanis' Bald Cypress with extensive "shari" and hollow trunk

Immature "Blunt & Fluted" Variant Form where the original trunk line was destroyed



Jim Osbornes' Bald Cypress "flat-top" with hollow trunk

Mature "Static & Stately" Form



Guy Guidrys' Bald Cypress "Twister" with spiraling deadwood

Immature "Blunt & Fluted" Variant Form



One of Vaughn Bantings' Flat-Top Cypress

Mature "Graceful & Fluid" Variant Form



Bald Cypress as a forest planting

Immature “Gradually Tapered” Typical Form

As you can see, they adapt very well to a variety of styles.

AN AMMENDED MODEL OF POSSIBLE TRUNK DESIGNS FOR CREATING BALD CYPRESS BONSAI

At this time, I would like to present, for your consideration, an expansion of Vaughns’ model on bald cypress. The purpose of this variation is to not only denote the various patterns to which bald cypress may be styled as bonsai, but also to present a representation of physical development and change as cypress’ mature. I do not do this lightly. Vaughn was a pioneer in developing flat-top bald cypress design and spent years documenting, photographing and drawing both juvenile and ancient specimens, as well as the many variations of cypress patterns as they transitioned from the juvenile form into more mature forms.

There are many who will be critical of me suggesting a modified version of his model. But Vaughn Banting was not only a mentor, but a good friend. And while he was indeed a pioneer, breaking new ground in the art of bonsai, like all pioneers who pave the way, I think he would be proud to see others build upon what he began. There are always others who follow the pioneers; those that build upon that hard work – not to diminish it, or change it for the sake of change, but

hopefully, to add to the knowledge, to refine it and expand it. And to hopefully bring about a greater understanding and appreciation for the work that was begun. That is my intent.

What is apparent, is that juvenile, conical-shaped cypress, all transition into flat-top forms as they mature. Vaughns' model describes the various forms that bald cypress may take when styled as bonsai. He splits them into two categories: immature formal upright and mature flat-top design.

I would add that there are also blunt and fluted flat-top variants as well. Such specimens can be observed in the old Henderson Swamp outside Lafayette, Louisiana. These mature specimens are only 20 -30 feet tall, compared to their more common cousins of 100-150 feet in height. This design was not in Vaughns' original model, but such trees do exist. They are typically a little taller than what Vaughn recorded as the juvenile "blunt and fluted" variants, but it seems reasonable to conclude that the slight increase in height could simply be a result of another 50 to 100 years of growth.

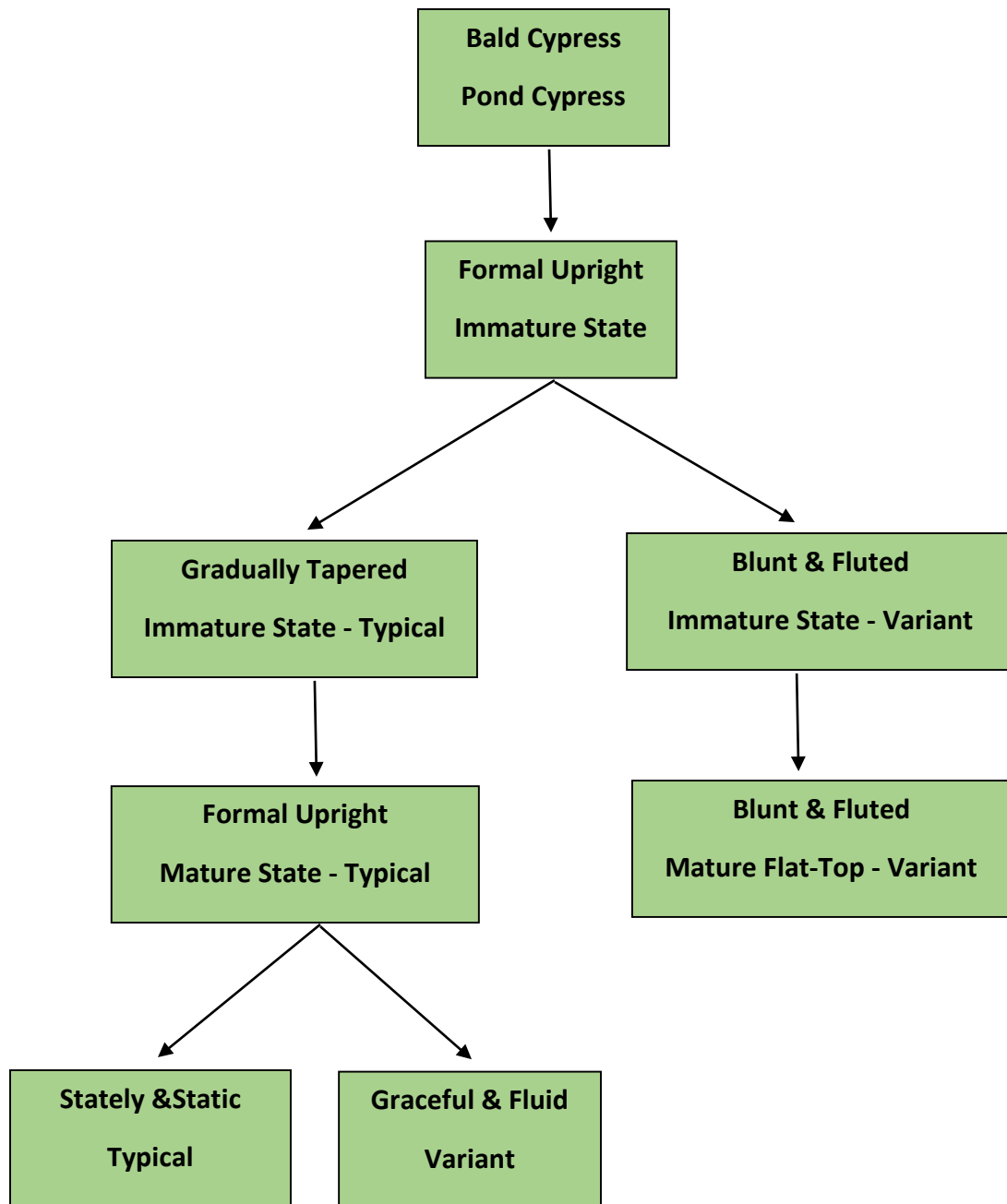
Since juvenile forms, both "gradually tapered" and "blunt and fluted" variants eventually develop into mature flat-top forms, I would alter the model slightly to illustrate that development over time and include the "blunt and fluted" mature flat-top.

The model below states that all bald cypress and pond cypress initially grow in a juvenile form that will either develop into a tall and gradually tapered (typical) form, or a short, blunt (atypical variant) form. Both of these growth patterns are initially an immature or juvenile stage of development.

Both will go through a multi-stage transition into mature, flat-top forms. Vaughn documented these transition stages and the various changes that took place in the branch structures of cypress while going through this process. We will examine them in some detail in the next article, along with how the apexes develop and that makes the bald cypress unique among other flat-top species around the world.

As the model below illustrates, the typical, gradually tapered, immature form, eventually develops into a mature flat-top. And that the gradually tapered flat-tops will either grow in the typical, "stately and static" form, or the occasional variant form that is "graceful and fluid"; possessing minor movement in the trunk line.

The immature, atypical "blunt and fluted" variant form will eventually develop into a flat-top. What I have attempted to do is to illustrate a logical progression of cypress from a juvenile, immature stages to a mature flat-top form in the various patterns in which pond and bald cypress grow. There are therefore, five legitimate and completely different forms into which one may create bald and pond cypress as a bonsai.



A REFLECTION ON THE CHANGE FROM THE JUVENILE TO MATURE STATES

In Vaughns' 1978 article "Bald Cypress: The Flat-Topped Style", printed in Volume 12, No. 3 in the Bonsai Journal, a publication of the American Bonsai Society, he stated that he saw bald cypress growing in two distinct patterns: the juvenile "Christmas tree" shape and the flat-top

shape of mature trees. He further proposed that each of those patterns, in turn, developed into two other possible forms.

He was fascinated by what caused the cypress to completely change its growth pattern. He determined that competition for light was not the reason for the development of a flat-topped canopy. Specimens growing in open areas develop this trait when there is no need to compete for light. He wrote, "...after exploring most environmental variable, like wet and dry locations, climate, and various exposures, it appears that the answer is more genetic than environmental. It is as if they are programmed to change at some point in their lives. However, the age at which this change occurs seems quite variable too, and some sort of environmental stimulus may be required for them to realize this genetic potential for a flat-topped branch structure."

An example of this can be seen at the Baton Rouge Garden Center on Independence Blvd. There are two bald cypress growing right outside the building where the Louisiana Bonsai Society holds its' events. Both trees appear to have been planted at the same time, appear to be quite young and seem to be about the same age. One is very clearly in a pyramidal shape, in an immature state. The other would appear to be entering the first transition stage to a flat-top. The top of the main line of the trunk has begun to arch over and the primary and secondary branches emanating from the top portion of the trunk appear to be forming a new apex. The rest of the branching is the same as the cypress planted next to it. Of course, we will not know for certain for many, many years. But it would, at least, appear to be occurring.

What would cause this change at such a young age? Dave DeGroot found it fascinating as we left the center during the Mid-Winter Workshop in January of 2019, and photographed the two trees. Both are approximately 20 feet in height and have a trunk base of about a foot, with no buttressing. Is it environmental or purely something in the genetics of the tree that causes this to occur? If it is environmental, why are both trees not being affected? Why would a tree begin to develop flat-top characteristics at such a young age and others not begin that process for a hundred years?

Why too, do the "blunt and fluted" variants exist? Is this a genetic mutation causing a semi-dwarf species? There remain many questions as to the cause(s) of these varied growth patterns. What remains for us as bonsai enthusiasts is to continue to study these patterns and expand our knowledge and understanding of bald cypress and how we can use these patterns to create authentic bald cypress bonsai.

1 Program Guide to Bald Cypress Forest – the Old and the New, Banting, Vaughn, Bonsai Clubs International, 1993.

2 Bonsai Journal of the American Bonsai Society (vol.12 no.3), "Evolution of a Man-made Flat Top", Banting, Vaughn, 1978.