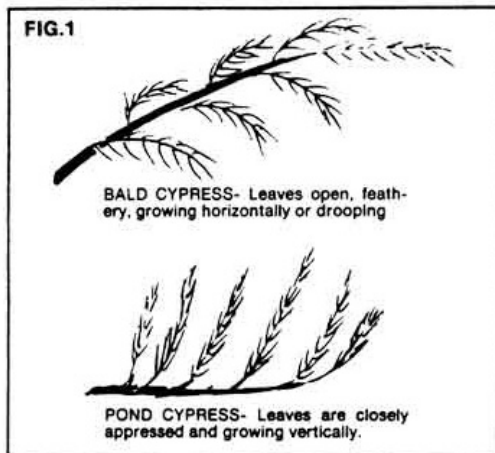


# Collecting Local Cypress

by Jimmy Littleton

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There are two species of *Taxodium* which are common in the New Orleans area: Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), and Pond Cypress (*T. ascendens*). Although they grow in similar environments and have similar growth habits, they can be distinguished by their foliage and their bark. The differences in foliage can be seen in (Fig. 1). The bark is smooth or slightly shredding and of a reddish brown color on the Bald Cypress, whereas it is gray or gray-brown and furrowed on the Pond Cypress. Techniques for collecting and training both species are the same. The best collecting time for cypress in our area is from mid-December to late February.



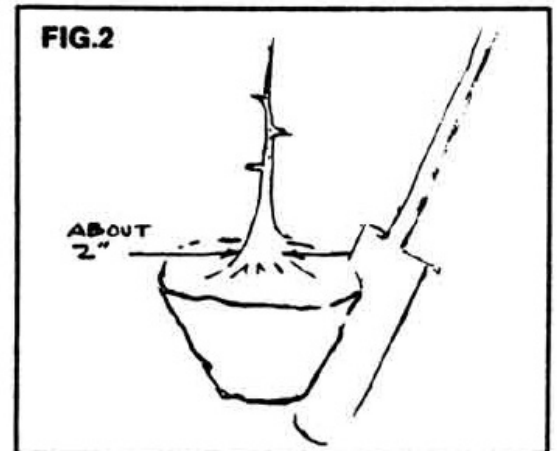
The best collecting areas are ponds and roadside ditches in lumbered areas that have been cut within the past six to twelve years. Young trees develop good branching only if they are not shaded by larger trees or tall grass. Seedlings sprout at the edge of standing water, and those which sprout where water levels are temporarily low will grow, for the most part, standing in shallow water. They naturally develop with a large flare at the base and will usually have many strong side roots growing just beneath the submerged soil surface. A taproot might or might not be present, and if present, may be insignificant or very large. In general, trees growing in drier areas tend to have big and stronger taproots.

Beware of trying to collect cypress which are not seedlings. It is very common to find many fine young trees in lumbered-over areas that have sprouted from old stumps. These are nearly impossible to collect.

Sprouts can usually be detached because they often grow as clumps of two to six, or even more trunks. Seedlings, on the other hand, are almost always single trees. When collecting cypress, be prepared to get wet. Bring a change of clothes, or at least pants and socks. Footwear should be minimally knee-high rubber boots; hip-boots or waders are better.

Materials needed are: large strong plastic bags such as “Extra Heavy Weight” Hefty trash bags; a “key hole” saw (cuts on push); and a “sharp shooter” or trenching shovel with the edge of the blade filed as sharp as possible. Optional items may include a file, hatchet, regular shovel, lopping shears, and large pots, tubs or tins of 5 gallon or more capacity.

After selecting your tree (making sure it is not a sprout) clear the area. If it is standing in water, check for submerged objects, holes, large roots, etc. If the tree is small, with a trunk diameter of 2” or less, you should be able to plug it out as in fig. 2.



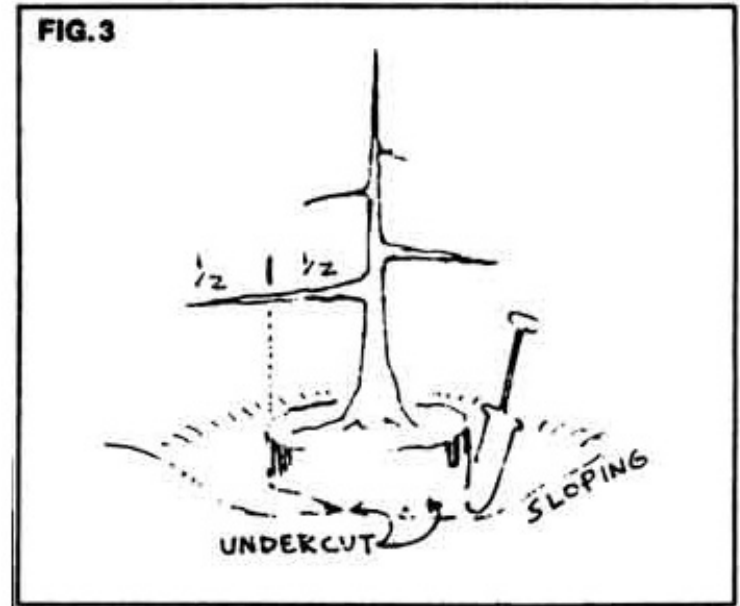
If the tree is larger than 2” in diameter, plunge the shovel straight into the ground as deeply as possible, describing a complete circle around the trunk at a distance from the tree equal to  $\frac{1}{2}$  the length of the longest branch. This should cut, or at least locate, all the lateral roots. Roots too big to be cut with the shovel must be sawed through. If the tree is standing in water, you may have to locate the roots by feel. (You might get a bit wet, here). As you saw, push the tree away from you. After each one or two completed cuts, try rocking the tree back and forth to see if you can free it.

Dave DeGroot using “pushing away” method in extracting prize cypress (photo by Vaughn Banting)

If the tree is not in standing water, dig a trench around the tree, again at a distance of  $\frac{1}{2}$  the length of the longest branch. The wall of the trench near the tree should be vertical, while the wall of the trench farther from the tree should be sloping, (see fig. 3). The trench should not be any deeper than the length of the shovel blade. DON'T ROCK THE TREE. The object here is to get the root ball out intact. At the bottom of the trench, undercut the root ball until the tree is free. The sloping outer wall of the trench enables you to make the near-horizontal undercuts.

After the tree is out of the ground, bag it securely. Double-bag large trees. Trees that have come up bare-rooted should have a bit of their native soil put in the bag with them. Keep collected trees out of sun and wind until they are gotten home.

**INITIAL POTTING AND TRAINING** – After collecting, pot your cypress in a container durable enough to last three years. The tree need not be bare-rooted, but it should have no more than 50% original soil in the container. Soil for initial potting should consist of 40-60% peat by volume (for water retention and acidity) with the balance consisting of coarse sand, Haditi, fine gravel, perlite or any mixture of the above. Pot the tree in a container that provides plenty of room. If tree was bare-rooted, top-dress with a little of the original soil for micro-nutrients and beneficial fungi. Soak the soil with “Superthrive” solution and place the tree in a sunny, windless location. When daytime temperatures reach 90° F., move the tree to a semi-shaded (70% sun) position, or a morning sun location.



Cypress should receive plenty of water year-round. In summer, placing the pot in a pan of water will ensure adequate moisture. Use a light colored plastic tray for water. Dark colored and metal trays get hotter.

Let the tree grow without pruning for the first season, but do rub off shoots which appear where they will not be used, such as on the lower trunk. Fertilize about every 2 weeks using fish emulsion or Peters' 20-20-20 at  $\frac{1}{2}$  strength, and water monthly with Superthrive from mid-May to mid-July late August, use any fertilizer high in potassium, such as 5-5-20. Discontinue Superthrive. Do not fertilize at all between autumn leaf drop and the following spring's swelling of buds.

In the second year, continue fertilizing program and do moderate branch trimming. Leave an adequate number of extra “insurance” branches in case you lose a few branches or you change your mind regarding styling.

In the third year, continue fertilizing and pruning as in year two. In cold areas, protect trees from hard freezes and wind in the winter.

At the end of the third growing season, if the tree is healthy, repot into a roomy bonsai container. Now is the time to make a firm decision about size and style of the tree, so you can select an appropriate pot. Use the same soil mix as for the initial potting, and again incorporate some of the old soil in the new.

Repotting should be done just before buds swell (March in our area). When repotting, disturb fine, dense roots as little as possible, but trim long, thick roots back even shorter than necessary to fit into the container. Soak repotted tree in water with Superthrive added at about 1 teaspoon per gallon of water. Place in sunny, windless location for 2 to 3 weeks.

In the heat of summer, partial shade, plus occasional spraying of the entire tree and surrounding area with water helps keep soil temperatures down and plant growth vigorous. Fertilize with fish emulsion or your choice of low nitrogen fertilizer. Continued time and care will produce a fine bonsai.

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