

# Bald Cypress as Bonsai (Part 3)

## (A Study of the Branch Structure in Mature flat-Topped Cypress)

By Randy Bennett

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

In Part 2 of this series of articles on bald cypress, we identified five general design patterns for creating bonsai using bald cypress and pond cypress. All of these variations lie within the Formal Upright and/or Flat-Topped styles. Within the general parameters discussed for those five designs are an even wider range of creative possibilities – namely the various developmental stages of growth as immature cypress transition into mature flat-tops.



**1. Immature Formal Upright Gradually Tapered (Typical)**



**2. Immature Formal Upright Blunt and Fluted (Variant)**



**3. Mature Flat-Top Static and Stately (Typical)**



#### **4. Mature Flat-Top Graceful and Fluid (Variant)**



#### **5. Mature Flat-Top Blunt and Fluted (Variant)**

Designing any of the immature, or juvenile styles is a relatively straight-forward process. One can simply follow any of the various design parameters for branch placement in the Chokkan or Formal Upright Style that is so familiar to all bonsai stylists.

It is not necessary to imitate the manner in which branches grow in nature among the juvenile styles. However, if one wishes to follow nature's example, the branches of a cypress should initially extend at an upward angle from the trunk and then either arch downward in a series of graceful curves, using the branches to form layers of descending foliage, or, as seen among the ancient monarchs of the swamp, the outermost secondary and tertiary branches die back, leaving a series of short, angular branches which are few in number.

Since a great deal has already been written about determining branch placement in the formal upright style, I will not dedicate more space to it here. For the purpose of this article, I will devote the bulk of discussion on the more complex branch structure found in the flat-top style for bald cypress. It is critical to understand how the flat-top apex is formed in nature if one is to create a believable flat-top cypress bonsai.

As Vaughn Banting first noted in his article, "Bald cypress: The Flat-Topped Style", the main trunk line in a flat-top cypress plays no major role in the formation of the apex.\* In most cases, the apex of a juvenile cypress will begin curving to one side or another as it begins to reach maturity. This process will continue for many, many years. We have yet to determine what triggers this change in the growth pattern to occur. But when the transition is complete, there will, in fact, be several apexes which create the relatively flat canopy. The multiple apexes are formed from primary, secondary and tertiary branches emanating from the curved portion of the main trunk line.

I photographed the tree pictured below growing beside I-59, near Manchac, Louisiana. Notice how the trunk line arches over as it nears the apex.





In this closer view of the flat-top canopy, you can easily identify the arching line of the main trunk as it extends to the left at about a 70 degree angle. You should also be able to easily identify three different apices that jointly create the crown.

Below are several more photos of flat-top cypress, taken along the same stretch of interstate. Take a moment to identify the main trunk lines and angles at which the primary and secondary branches grow to form the flat-top. Also note the multiple apices. You should also pay attention to the fact that the highest point of the crown is offset from the centerline of the trunk.





As you examine the photos above, several patterns of growth begin to emerge and become evident: First, the highest point of the multiple apices is almost always off to one side and not directly over the center of the main trunk line. Second, you begin to notice a zig-zag pattern of alternating line as the primary and secondary branches develop to create the flat-top canopy. Third, you will note that only a few branches remain below the crown of the tree and those that linger tend to be much shorter versions of the original branch structure. In the immature or juvenile stage, all of the branches grow along the trunk line beneath the apex. As the tree matures and the flat-top canopy develops, most of the lower branch structures are sacrificed by the tree.



Occasionally, one can see where the original juvenile apex is still present, but beneath a diffused crown of primary, secondary and tertiary branches. On a few occasions, I have observed where the original trunk line apex has died –perhaps due to a lightning strike or hurricane damage. What often occurs in these cases, is that a primary branch takes over and the old trunk is replaced with a new arching trunk line and the typical flat-top is still created as in the above photo.

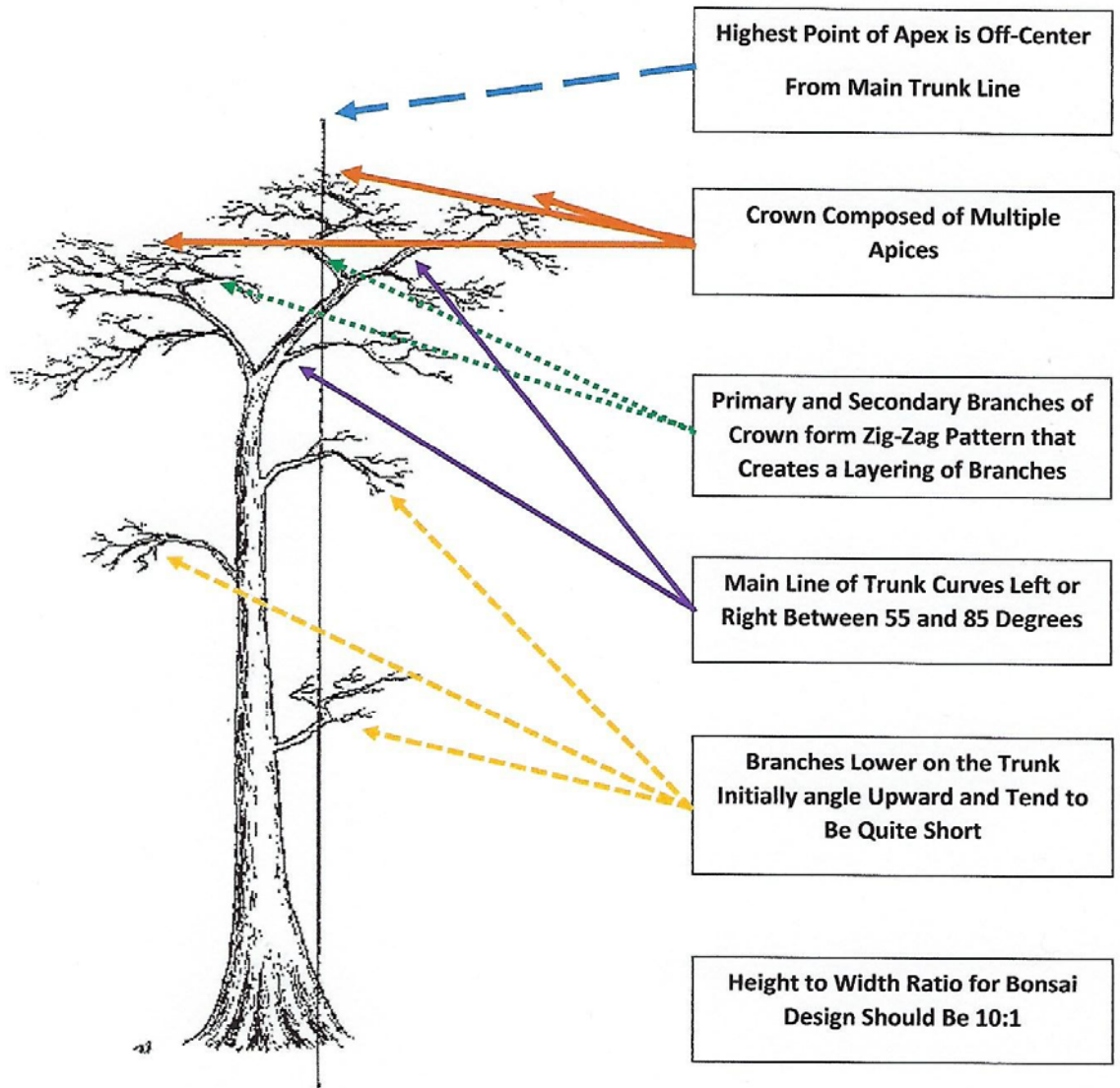
What becomes evident as one studies the canopy structures is that, just like the trunk forms, there are typical growth patterns and there are atypical growth patterns. I have photographed hundreds of cypress in south Louisiana and Mississippi and there is no strict pattern of growth. However, the typical form is that the juvenile or immature apex is lost as the trunk begins to grow to one side or the other.

What follows is that primary branches grow back in the opposite direction from the arching, main trunk line. From there, tertiary branches grow in the opposite direction of the primary branch to follow the main trunk line, forming, what can best be described as a “zig-zag” pattern.

Sometimes this change in direction is immediate and other times there is a sharp curve to mark the directional change. One can often follow this distinct directional change three, four or even five times beginning at the point where the primary branches grow from the sharply curving main trunk line.



## Typical Characteristics of Flat-Top Bald Cypress for Bonsai Design



I hope that this installment of the article provides a source for discussion and analysis regarding the branch structures possible in mature flat-top cypress. And that as you develop insight and understanding of how flat-top cypress grow, you can translate that knowledge into good bonsai design.



- Vaughn Banting, 'Bald cypress: The Flat-Topped Style, "Bonsai Journal", Vol. 12, No. 3, 1978.