

# Bald Cypress as Bonsai (Part 7)

## (Collecting Bald Cypress From the Swamp)

By Randy Bennett

The previous article dealt with creating a flat-top bald cypress bonsai from 5 gallon nursery stock. However, if you want a cypress with a buttressed and fluted base, your best bet is go into the swamp and collect one. What you will most often collect is referred to as a stump-cut specimen. You are starting with only the stump; no branches and no apex. From such a stump, you will develop a new apex and all branching.



**The best time to collect is in winter when trees are dormant**

### Planning and Preparing for Your Trip

Before you go trudging into the swamp, there are several things you need to know and a few essential pieces of equipment to take along. First and foremost, you need to make sure that

where you are collecting is not protected wetlands or posted property. Always get permission from land owners before you go collecting.

Second, plan ahead. Set up a couple of prospective dates in mid to late January, before trees begin to leaf out. The cypress in south Louisiana are usually starting to leaf out by the beginning to middle of February. The cold weather also helps to ensure that you will not have problems with the native inhabitants – you know, things like mosquitoes, rattlesnakes, water moccasins, copperheads, coral snakes and alligators.



**“Say hello to my little friend!” He refused to smile for the camera.**

You will want to have good weather and temperatures that are not too cold and not too warm. If it is cold and windy, your hands will feel the pain after working in and out of the cold water. If it is late in the season and an especially warm day, you may find that the snakes have come out to sun themselves. Felix Famularo and I went out one year in February. The cypress were already leafing out. It was a warm day and I never saw so many snakes at one time in all my life. They were everywhere you looked and often hard to see. It was very disconcerting and we did what

any red-blooded American male would do – we got the hell out of there! Somewhere between 55 and 65 degrees is a good day to go.

Third, don't go alone. We have had more than one club member go into the swamp by themselves to collect trees and get lost. Also, for your information, there is often no cell service out there. So if, for some reason, you need help, you will need someone with you. But the possibility of getting lost isn't the only reason to have a partner (or two). I went out recently by myself on a scouting trip with no intention of collecting. I was simply going to check out a couple of new areas as possible collecting sites. I was walking in about 10 inches of water and sinking down about 10 more in the mud as I walked. With one step, I slid into a large hole, hidden by the dark water. I sank in mud up to my knees and the water was at my waist. I was only about 30 feet from where I entered the swamp. It took me about 20 minutes to get out of that hole. Not smart!



**Once you enter, stay mindful of your path.... It is easy to get turned around and lose your sense of direction.**

Fourth, you will want to have the right kind of gear. When I was young and stupid and first started collecting cypress in the swamp, I just wore blue jeans and old sneakers, but I was soaking wet, cold and miserable by the time we left. Then I got shrimp boots. They just filled up with water and got stuck in the mud with the same end result. Next, I graduated to hip boots. That turned out to be problematic too. I don't care how careful you are, at some time or another, you are going to lose your balance and fall in the water. Ever get hip boots full of water and mud and

try to get up and walk again. It doesn't work too well. Then you have to just sit down in the water again to take the boots off in order to empty them! I now use chest waders. I have yet to get water in them – even when I fall. So far, I always seem to fall forward. I guess when the day comes that I fall backward, I'll be in just as much trouble because I won't be able to move with them full of water and mud.

Next, you'll need a backpack for carrying tools and other implements of destruction. I have an oversized pack frame that I use when I am out to collect a large specimen – the type that hunters use for carrying out game on hunting trips. That way I can carry the tools I need and also strap the tree to the frame to carry it out. You often need both hands to keep your balance and to hang onto nearby trees and limbs as you walk. But normally, I just carry a knapsack with what I need and carry my prize out by hand. I have seen people use mortar tubs with foam blocks or noodles attached to the sides to help keep the mortar tub afloat when a heavy cypress stump is in it. Then they attach a pull-rope to the front so they can drag their prize out of the swamp instead of carrying it. But just about anything you use is going to have issues. I guarantee you that the path out from where you dug your prize will never be smooth going. Between cypress knees, fallen trees and limbs, submerged obstacles and the occasional deep water, the going can be tiring, to say the least.

So, let's talk about what to put in your pack. You are going to need a saw, but not just any saw – you are going to need a GOOD ONE! You will get various recommendations from a lot of people. Everybody has their preferred tools of choice. There are some who take a battery-operated reciprocating saw with a long blade for cutting through the roots. However, the water where I collect is usually about 6-8 inches deep in the winter and you'll have to go at least that deep again through the mud to cut through the roots ( that's about 16+ inches). I place too high a value on my power tools to go sinking them in the swamp. What I recommend is a wide-bladed saw, with a blade length of about 15' and teeth that cut both on the push and pull stroke.

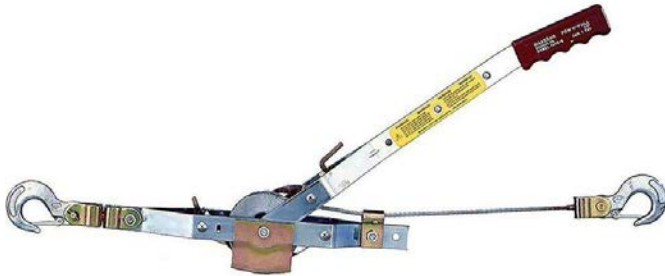


This one is exactly as I just described and can be purchased at one of the local 'big box' home improvement stores for \$8.45.

Before I forget to mention it, one item you should not be without is several bottles of drinking water. You do get thirsty out there and swamp water is not the best thing to consume to hydrate.

Next, I have been known to take a pair of loppers and a sharp pair of spring-operated pruning shears for getting to those hard-to-reach roots. But truth be known, the saw is your main cutting tool.

The next most indispensable tools are a come-along, about 20 feet of chain, one to two nylon straps with D-rings, a set of threaded 'quick links', a 'contractor' grade trash bag and some twine.



Winch Puller or 'Come-Along' - \$30



chain - \$1 per linear foot



Strap with D-rings - \$6



Threaded 'quick-links - \$3

Now you are probably asking yourself, "Why on earth would I need all that?" Well, keep reading and you'll find out.

When you are looking for a collectable piece of material, you obviously want a specimen with a well-proportioned fluted base. Those are easy to find. What is harder to find is one that has good immediate taper. The typical cypress will have a trunk like a telephone pole right above the fluted base and what you want to look for is a trunk that continues to taper above the flutes.

A couple of other suggestions: first, when you are going through the swamp, stay as close to the trees and roots as possible to avoid sinking. Second, avoid open water altogether. If you get away from the trees and get stuck, there's nothing to grab onto for leverage to get yourself out. If that happens, the only thing you can do is go swimming and that's no fun in the dead of winter – even on a 55 degree day. Third, look at the trees in the photo below. The small one in the middle may look like a potential keeper, but you will find it almost impossible to collect. It is too close to the root systems of other trees. You will not be able to get a good angle with your saw and you'll spend most of your time cutting through the roots of the trees next to it. So select a specimen that is growing away from its' sisters and brothers and remember, the flare of the base continues below the water line and is always bigger than what you can see.



**The smaller cypress in the center may look like a good choice, but it will be extremely difficult to collect due to the intertwining roots of the other cypress nearby.**

Once you find what looks like a good candidate, use your hands to feel around the base of the tree below the water line to see how far out the flutes extend before they are buried beneath the mud. Once you've identified the basal circumference, come out about 6 more inches and begin sawing through the roots at about a 45 degree angle to attempt to cut underneath the base of the tree.

Once you feel like you have cut around the entire perimeter of the base, it's time to bring out the other equipment mentioned above. Look for a stout tree nearby to which you can attach the length of chain and the Winch Puller or Come-Along.

Now I've been collecting bald cypress for about 40 years and I've heard several people claim to have been the first to come up with the idea of using a Come-Along as an aid to extracting bald cypress from the swamp. But as far as I know, Bill Schwertz was the first to come up with the idea and use it. In fact, when he first told me about it, I thought, "That's crazy!", but when I saw the size of the trees he was pulling out with much greater ease, I became a believer and started using one myself.

I asked him what gave him the idea of using a Come-Along and he just looked at me and said, "I just don't like to work hard." I felt like a moron for not coming up with the idea myself and more like a fool for working my guts out for years when I could have been collecting trees in less than half the time and with much less effort! Now everyone I know uses a Come-Along to help extricate cypress stumps from the swamp.

You are going to use the Come-Along to begin pulling the tree to one side. This will allow you to get further under the base of the tree and cut through more roots. You will get very little movement of the trunk at first, but as you keep working and changing the direction of the pull, the device will give you greater and greater reach under the base to saw through roots. Now there are those who will think, "A Winch Puller (or Come-Along) will do the job without the need for carrying a length of chain. After all, a Come-Along has about 10-12 feet of cable. Well, I went to a lot of work one year trying to collect a cypress stump, only to find out that my cable was not long enough to reach the nearest tree. So now, I always bring plenty of chain and threaded quick-links.

Wrap the end of the chain around the trunk of a nearby stout tree near the base. Then secure the wrap with a quick-link by joining the end of the chain to one of the other links. Now you can have the Come-Along closer to the tree you are trying to collect.

Wrap the strap with the D-rings around the trunk of the tree you are collecting. Place the D-ring strap head high or higher to get maximum leverage during the pull. Connect one of the hooks on the Come-along to the D-rings and pull out about 6 feet or more of the Come-Along cable and hook that end to the chain. Depending on the size of the links in the chain, you may have to make another loop with a quick-link in order to get the chain secured with the hook.

Now you are ready to start pulling the tree. It will not go very far initially. But it will give you additional room to be able to get your hand saw further under the base of the tree to cut additional root structures. You will probably have to move the chain several times to several different trees. This allows you to pull the trunk of the tree over in different directions by creating multiple anchor points from which to pull with the Come-Along. Each time you do this, you will be able to cut through more and more of the root structures and eventually free the tree.



### **One of Bill Butlers' Collected Cypress Immediately After Getting It Free**

Once you have cut through all the roots, it is time to cut the trunk to the desired height, but always do so higher than what you think you will need. You can always cut it lower when you get back home. Bag up the root ball with a 'contractor' trash bag and tie it all up with twine. This will help prevent the roots from drying out before you get home.

Once you get home, it's time to reduce the root ball by cutting it flat. I use an electric chainsaw for this purpose. This will facilitate getting the cypress into a grow-box or other suitable container. After reducing the rootball with the chainsaw, it is good bonsai practice to take a root cutter or other sharp pruning tool and make clean cuts on the ends of the roots cut by the chainsaw. The chainsaw will tear the ends of the roots and bark and without making clean cuts on them, there will be dieback on the damaged roots. Cutting away damaged tissue will promote faster healing and a healthier tree.



**Collected Bald Cypress Stumps Prior to Greater Root Reduction**

You are able to make such a severe cut to the root ball for several reason: first, because the trees are constantly in water, fibrous roots are growing everywhere from the trunk and so you do not have to have a huge root-ball to obtain sufficient roots for the tree to recover. Second, the trunk, as well as the roots store food necessary for spring growth and there is a sufficient quantity to stimulate dormant buds over the entire trunk.



**After Further Root Reduction**

Pot your newly collected stump in a grow-box, mortar tub or, if you prefer, straight into a bonsai container. Potting medium is obviously your choice and as stated in the previous article, I use Miracle-Grow Potting Mix (only on my bald cypress), for the reasons previously stated.



### **A First Year Collected Cypress in Early Spring Potted in a Mortar Tub**

The next step is to begin carving a convex cut on the back side of the tree where the trunk was cut. That will be covered in detail in the next installment in this series of articles on “Bald Cypress as Bonsai”. You will have a couple of years to decide which of the five styles your cypress stump will take: immature gradually tapered, immature blunt and fluted, mature static and stately, mature, mature graceful and fluid or mature blunt and fluted. However, your decision may be limited depending on the size of the stump you collected. A mature static and stately or graceful and fluid flat-top would be out of the question with a base that is overly large since a 1:10 firth to height ratio would be too tall for a bonsai.



**Bill Butler Working on His 'Praying Madonna' Cypress (so named for the knee)**