

Wood of The Month

Cypress – *Taxodium distichum*



Cypress, *Taxodium distichum*, is a deciduous conifer, meaning it is an evergreen (conifer) however, it loses its leaves in the winter. That is why it is commonly called bald cypress. The common name 'cypress' is applied to two genera. One genus is of the family *Taxidoaceae* to which the bald cypress belongs and is more than likely the most familiar to us here in Missouri. The other applies to the true cypress species of the genus *Capressus* and includes Monterey cypress which is native to California and has been widely planted in Australia, New Zealand and East Africa and, on a small scale, in Europe. The bald cypress is a magnificent tree and is often planted around pond margins and even in yards, parking lots, parks and campuses.

Bald cypress grows in swamps, sloughs, and wet bottomland forests in the lowlands of southeastern Missouri and mostly on down in the southeastern United States. One characteristic feature of the cypress is the 'knees' which are aerial roots that protrude above the ground or swamp water where it grows. The knees are sometimes harvested and used for artistic carvings and woodworking projects.

Cypress lumber is strong and durable and the heartwood is a pleasant yellowish-brown to pinkish-brown color and when cut it has a cedar-like scent. With its legendary beauty, natural durability, and high rot resistance, cypress has long been a staple on beach homes along the Atlantic seaboard and throughout the Southern United States. Because cypress generates its own preservative oil, called cypressene, it's an ideal wood for coastal locations with constant heat, humidity, and torrential rains. More recently, the use of cypress has spread from Maine to Southern California as the wood is increasingly being used in place of other wood species, such as cedar, redwood, and pressure-treated wood.

For the woodturner cypress is a surprisingly nice wood to turn. It turns well for being a 'softwood', finishes nicely and is light yet strong. It is fairly easy to dent however, and predrilling for nails and screws will help avoid splitting. I like to use it for Christmas ornaments where lightness is important. Sharp tools and light cuts are recommended to avoid tearout. It normally has straight grain, which may be even or uneven, and a coarse texture. The oil content gives it a greasy feel. It sands well, glues well and holds paint very well.

An artistic form of the wood is caused by the fungus *Stereum taxodii*, which causes a brown pocket rot known as "pecky cypress". It attacks the heartwood of living trees, usually from the crown down to the roots.

Cypress wood has been used for barrels, caskets, boats, shingles, railroad ties, fence posts, docks, and bridge beams. It is also used for siding, sash, doors, paneling, trim and general millwork. Tanks, vats, greenhouse framing and products subjected to moisture are ideal uses.

You can read more about Cypress at; [Cypress on the Wood-database](#) or at [Cypress on Wikipedia](#).

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