**Taxodium distichum** ‘Monarch of Illinois’: ‘Monarch of Illinois’ Baldcypress

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson

**Introduction**

The unusually wide-spreading, pyramidal form on ‘Monarch of Illinois’ baldcypress eventually develops into a broad-topped, spreading, open specimen when mature. Landscape specimens will probably grow more than 100 feet tall. Spread on this cultivar is typically about two-thirds the height, so allow plenty of room. Trees grow at a moderately fast rate, reaching 40 to 50 feet in about 15 to 25 years. Although it is native to wetlands along running streams, growth is often faster on moist, well-drained soil. The pale green, needle-like leaves turn a brilliant coppery red in fall before dropping, but the bare branches and reddish gray, peeling bark provide much landscape interest during the winter. The trunk grows unusually thick toward the base, even on young trees. The small seeds are used by some birds and squirrels.

**General Information**

*Scientific name:* *Taxodium distichum*

*Pronunciation:* tack-SO-dee-um DISS-tick-um

*Common name(s):* ‘Monarch of Illinois’ baldcypress

*Family:* Taxodiaceae

*USDA hardiness zones:* 5A through 11 (Fig. 2)

*Origin:* native to North America

*Invasive potential:* little invasive potential

*Uses:* urban tolerant; street without sidewalk; screen; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); reclamation; parking lot island < 100 sq ft; parking lot island 100-200 sq ft; parking lot island > 200 sq ft; tree lawn 3-4 feet wide; tree lawn 4-6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; highway median; shade; specimen; hedge

**Availability:** not native to North America

![Middle-aged Taxodium distichum ‘Monarch of Illinois’](image)

Figure 1. Middle-aged *Taxodium distichum* ‘Monarch of Illinois’

Credits: Ed Gilman, UF/IFAS
**Description**

Height: 60 to 90 feet  
Spread: 60 to 70 feet  
Crown uniformity: symmetrical  
Crown shape: pyramidal  
Crown density: dense  
Growth rate: fast  
Texture: fine  

**Foliage**

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)  
Leaf type: simple  
Leaf margin: entire  
Leaf shape: linear, lanceolate  
Leaf venation: none, or difficult to see  
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous  
Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches  
Leaf color: green  
Fall color: yellow, copper  
Fall characteristic: showy  

**Fruit**

Fruit shape: round, oval, cone  
Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch, 1 to 3 inches  
Fruit covering: dry or hard  
Fruit color: brown, green  
Fruit characteristics: attracts squirrels/mammals; not showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem  

**Trunk and Branches**

Trunk/bark/branches: branches droop; showy; typically one trunk; thorns  
Pruning requirement: little required  
Breakage: resistant  
Current year twig color: green  
Current year twig thickness: thin  
Wood specific gravity: 0.46  

**Culture**

Light requirement: full sun  
Soil tolerances: sand; loam; clay; acidic; slightly alkaline; well-drained; extended flooding  
Drought tolerance: high  
Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate  

**Other**

Roots: not a problem  
Winter interest: yes  
Outstanding tree: yes  
Ozone sensitivity: unknown  
Verticillium wilt susceptibility: resistant  
Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases  

**Use and Management**

Although often seen at water’s edge where it will develop “knees”, or root projections, that will extend above the water, baldcypress can also be grown in dry locations and makes an attractive lawn, street, or shade tree. Cypress knees do not generally form on these drier sites. Cities from Charlotte, NC, Dallas, TX to Tampa, FL currently use the species as a street tree and it should be used more extensively throughout its range in urban landscapes. It provides a good vertical accent to the landscape and should be used more often in urban areas. Baldcypress can be clipped into a formal hedge, creating a wonderful soft screen. Surprisingly, the roots do not appear to lift sidewalks and curbs as readily as some other species. Its delicate, feathery foliage affords light, dappled shade, and the heartwood of baldcypress is quite resistant to rot. However, most lumber
available at lumber yards today is sapwood and is not resistant to rot.

Baldcypress is ideal for wet locations, such as its native habitat of stream banks and mucky soils, but the trees will also grow remarkably well on almost any soil, including heavy, compacted, or poorly-drained muck, except alkaline soils with a pH above 7.5. Locate where the sun will strike the tree on all sides for best symmetrical development. Baldcypress is relatively maintenance-free, requiring pruning only to remove dead wood and unwanted drooping lower branches which persist on the tree. It maintains a desirably straight trunk and a moderately dense canopy, and does not form double or multiple leaders as do many other large trees.

The cultivar ‘Shawnee Brave’ has a narrow, pyramidal form, 15 to 20 feet wide. ‘Pendens’ has drooping branchlets and large cones. *Taxodium distichum* var. *nutans* (*Taxodium ascendens*) is native to wet, boggy areas with standing water, whereas *Taxodium distichum* is most common along streams.

Propagation is by rooting cuttings.

**Pests**

Mites can be particularly troublesome in dry summers without irrigation, causing early leaf browning and defoliation in mid to late summer. Bagworms can cause some cosmetic damage.

**Diseases**

Twig blight is caused by a weak pathogen and is usually present on dead or dying tissue. When the tree is stressed the fungus can kill branch tips. Dead tips can be pruned off. Do not let dead or diseased branches remain on the tree. Keep trees healthy with regular fertilization.