

Leon County's Adopt-a-Tree Program

December 5, 2002

This year the Leon County Adopt-a-Tree Program is planning on using the bald-cypress for its free street tree giveaway. [Bald-cypress](#) you say? Isn't that the tree that grows in swamps? Yes, it is that tree. Bald-cypresses are able to grow in a wetter environment than most trees. There it can reach great age and size with its characteristic fluted base and protruding knees.



Interestingly, while the bald-cypress competes best in a watery environment, it grows very well in drier urban settings, too. The bald-cypress's tolerance of a watery environment makes it more tolerant of urban soils. This is because the cypress's roots can tolerate low oxygen conditions. There is not as much oxygen underwater. If you don't believe me, try breathing underwater. Urban soils often are very compacted and thus have less oxygen available for roots to carry on respiration. You can simulate this by trying to breathe through a pillow as opposed to open air. This ability to tolerate low oxygen soils helps the cypress survive better in compacted urban soils.

Bald-cypress has many other good qualities that make it an excellent choice for a street tree. It is very disease resistant and quite wind sturdy. Interestingly, the knees, which it produces in swamps, are not produced in drier soils. An important point if you want to walk or mow around them.

Bald-cypress grows rapidly. When young, its shape is narrow to broadly pyramidal. Eventually bald-cypress develops into a broad-topped, spreading, open specimen tree. Although trees in the wild can reach great size, most cultivars are much smaller, reaching 40-50 feet tall in about 15 to 25 years.

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 winter. The fallen needles are nice in that they don't blow around as easily as some of our more popular fast-growing shade trees like the sycamore.

If you decide you want a bald-cypress the county will plant one tree per household, between your house and the road, if you live outside the city limits. To let the county know you want a tree, Leon County Right-of-Way Management Superintendent, Tom Jackson says to follow the instructions from one of the ads that will appear in the Tallahassee Democrat on December 3, 5, 10, 13, 15, 16, and 19, 2002. If you let them know you want a tree, they will instruct you to put a wooden stake where you want the tree. If there is no stake, the county will pick a good spot. Remember, these trees need to be planted so they won't grow up into power lines.

If you decide to go with a bald-cypress or decide to use this excellent time of year to plant any other tree you should keep in mind the following.

A well-established lawn's roots give considerable competition to a tree's roots for water and nutrients. This is

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why it is always good to reduce this competition by placing and maintaining a mulch layer two to three times the spread of a newly planted tree's branches.

A newly planted tree should be watered daily as it was in the nursery for the first 10 weeks after you plant it. Then slowly taper off watering. Water during dry periods for the first 1-2 years. Especially if they are dry years like we have had lately. Lawn irrigation systems are not adequate. A good watering method is to bury a soaker hose under the mulch. This will get most of the water right to the root ball, where it is needed.

For more information on trees or other aspects of gardening, visit the University of Florida IFAS website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>

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