
Wildflower Spot – March 2013

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

LONGLEAF PINE

Pinus palustris

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Longleaf Pine is well-named with evergreen needles 10-18 inches long, 3 in a bundle. Densely crowded at the ends of branches in a distinctive arrangement, they form large round clusters, often drooping. Twigs are very stout, over 1/2 in diameter and orange-brown in color. In winter, the ends of branches have large buds, up to 5 inches long; covered with silvery-white, fringed scales, known as “candles” when elongating. Cones are larger, over 8 inches long, with short prickles. When young, the bark is gray-brown, thin and scaly; with age the bark shows flat, scaly, reddish brown plates. The tree grows tall and straight, to 90 feet, with sparse branches.

The habitat for this species is largely gone, due to overharvesting, and commercial forestry practices. Now occurring in Virginia only in Brunswick, Southampton, Suffolk, Isle of Wight and Virginia Beach, Longleaf Pine ranges south to Florida and Texas. It grows in moist or dry sandy soil, largely on the Coastal Plain. Extremely fire tolerant, when young the bud is protected by the compact arrangement of needles, hence the tree is adapted to frequently



burned environments. Historically, frequent fires ignited by lightning and Native Americans sustained this species.

Longleaf Pine is valuable as lumber, tar, pitch and turpentine. Several species of birds prefer this habitat, including the critically endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker, and perhaps the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. ❖

Photo: Longleaf Pine (*Pinus palustris*) taken by Phillip Merritt
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.