

The Story of Longleaf Pine.

By Patrick Anderson RCA #475

Longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) was once a dominate fixture of the southern landscape. Before European colonization longleaf pine forests covered 90,000,000 acres of land. The trees reigned from Virginia to Florida, and as far west as Texas. These forests were home to many animal species, including the now endangered red-cockaded wood pecker.

The longleaf pine's growth and ecology are unique. The trees are the longest lived of the southern pines, up to 250 years. Some are reported to be 500 years old. Fire ecology was very important to the longleaf pine. Mature trees are extremely fire resistant. Seasonal fires would eliminate seedling grass competition, while creating a mineral soil required for seed germination. Unlike other members of the pine family, after seed germination the longleaf pine would hold itself to a 'grass' phase. Instead of putting on top growth, longleaf pines would concentrate their efforts in root development. Above ground, long leaf pines will survive as tufts of needles from 5 to 12 years before reaching for the sky.

With the European invasion of North America came the beginning of the end for the longleaf pine's dominance. The wood was highly sought after for naval stores and lumber. Clear cutting was the most common method of harvesting the trees. Debris left from clear cuts became fuel for fires that burned at an intensity the trees were not adapted for. Trees in the grass phase were ideal food for introduced feral pigs. And so today long leaf pine forests only cover 6% of the area they once ruled.

Efforts are underway to restore the longleaf pine forests through groups like the Longleaf Pine Alliance. Longleaf pines are listed as vulnerable by the IUCN, so the next chance you get, take time to enjoy the majesty of these truly southern trees.