



History of the Pitch Pine

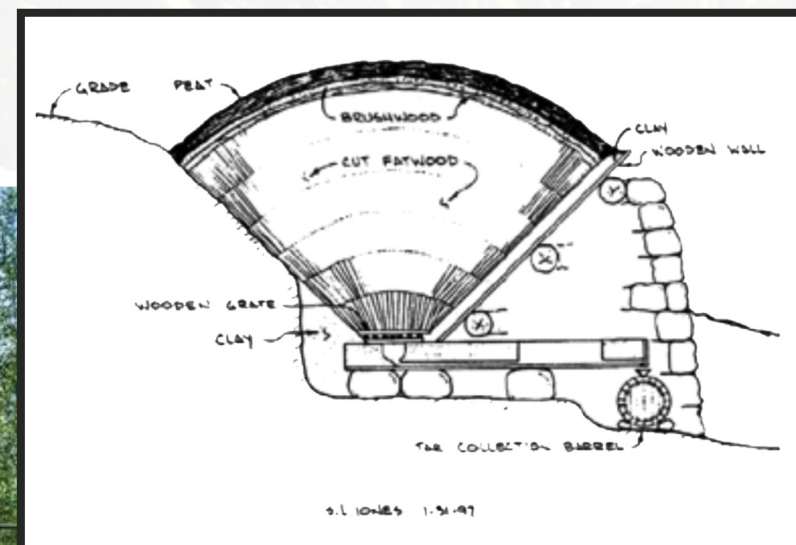


Photo: Gary Whiton

The glacial sand plains and hilly ridgelines in Connecticut were once home to abundant stands of pitch pines (*Pinus rigida*) and scrub oak (*Quercus ilicifolia*). Unfortunately, these areas eventually succumbed to the pressure of human activity. The first settlers in New England, who lacked access to tallow for making candles, collected and burned the highly resinous pitch pine knots for light at night. This practice gave the trees their nickname, "Candlewood." Early colonists also harvested pitch pines and burned them in large earthen kilns to make pine tar, a preservative used in the shipbuilding industry. Turpentine was also a valuable product made from pitch pines. Later, Connecticut's large sand plains were cleared for housing developments and numerous gravel pits.



Earthen kiln used to produce pine tar



Source: SF Maritime National Parks

The Tree

Considered a hard pine, pitch pines are slow growing conifers found in the eastern United States from northern Georgia to

Maine and on into Canada. The species is most common on the Atlantic coastal plain and primarily dominant in pine barrens. Pitch pine is an early seral (intermediate stage) species that is replaced by hardwoods in the absence of forest fires. Fires expose mineral soil and allow light to reach the forest floor providing good conditions for pitch pine seed germination. However, in some very harsh habitats, pitch pine may represent a climax forest species.



Pitch pines are different from the more common eastern white pines found in this area. A definitive way to identify pitch pines is by counting the number of needles. Pitch pines have three needles; white pines have five.

Pitch pines are shade intolerant and can be found growing in harsh, rocky environments. Being a medium sized tree, they rarely grow beyond 82 feet, but dwarf pines also exist. Pitch pines are especially popular with bonsai enthusiasts. Studies show that tall tree and dwarf tree populations are almost genetically identical.

A unique feature of the tree is its thick, scaly, alligator-like bark. The bark can be up to 1 inch thick at the base of mature trees and helps protect them from fire. Also helping them to survive are epicormic buds (shoots that can develop from within a tree trunk), which may sprout when a tree is stressed.



Photo: Greg Decker



Photo: Brooklyn Botanic Garden

Above: The pitch pine is popular among bonsai enthusiasts.

Left: The thick bark of pitch pine helps protect the tree from fire. An epicormic sprout can be seen on this tree's trunk.

