

LOBLOLLY PINE (*PINUS TAEDA*)

As people travel up and down the Eastern Shore of Virginia, the predominant pine tree one notices is the Loblolly Pine. The tree is native to the southeast United States, ranging from Maryland and southern New Jersey, south to north Florida, and west to Texas, excluding the Mississippi River Valley. The Loblolly is the second most dominant forest species within its range. (The Red Maple is the most dominant.)

The Loblolly grows naturally in low-lying areas but is very adaptable to a wide range of soils. The tree prefers acid soils. The needle litter, as it decays, makes the soil acidic, therefore, its own needles are the perfect medium for Loblolly seedling growth. Normally, the tree grows to approximately 100 feet, the tallest being 160 feet high. The needles come in bundles of three, approximately 6.5 inches long, and sometimes, slightly twisted. Needles drop after about two years, and are replaced constantly, giving the tree an evergreen appearance. The needles generally drop in the fall or early winter however, weather conditions may cause the needles to drop at any time.

New cones are green and about 4.5 inches long, and an inch across. They ripen to a brown color and grow to 2 inches across. Trees reach maturity between 50 and 100 years; the oldest known tree is 276 years old! Like most pines, the Loblolly starts out in a “Christmas Tree” shape, however, as it matures, it grows taller, but does not produce any low branches, giving it the tall crown, “Lollypop” shape.

In the timber trade, Loblolly is considered a southern yellow pine. It is fast-growing, easily grown from seed, and easily transplanted. This makes it a good candidate for commercially grown timber. Loblolly has

the advantage that it does not need fire for seed growth and maturation.

The Loblolly is grown mostly in a plantation setting, with anywhere from 350 to 650 trees planted per acre. The number depends on the end use: pulp or lumber, or something in between. High-density plantings are used for pulp and are harvested at around 16 years. Low-density plantings are for timber production and are harvested for dimensional lumber at approximately 30+ years. In an in-between method of plantation growing, trees are thinned at 16 to 18 years, removing trees for pulp that are not growing well, have cankers or major branching below 18 feet. Sawmills want unblemished logs of at least 18 feet. The remaining trees will have more room to grow with less competition for light and nutrients. These trees can be harvested after 30 to 50 years and beyond.

This is the short course on tree plantations. The science is much more complicated. Landowners need time and commitment over the long haul if growing Loblolly pines.