

# Pitch Pine

## *Pinus rigida*

**Common name:**

Pitch Pine, Black Pine, Torch Pine, Sap Pine

**Pronunciation:**

Py-nus Rij-i-duh

**Family:**

Pinaceae

**Genus:**

*Pinus*

"The Pitch Pine is *the* Pine of Cape Cod and of storm-swept Montauk Point on extreme eastern Long Island.... Above all, it predominates in the famous Pine barrens of New Jersey."

"The Pitch Pine's wood today enjoys no better reputation than the Piney's worst fame. It is full of knots, coarse-grained, hard to work. It holds nails and bolts so poorly that ships built of it have been known to pull apart at sea. Yet its resistance to water decay made it invaluable for ships' pumps and the old water wheels of primitive American mills."

"Pitch Pine knots, which weaken and disfigure the wood for carpenters' use, yet are so filled with resin that they resist decay long after the stump has rotted away, and in regions where the tree was abundant, they used to cover the forest floor. Pioneer children were kept at work, stooping and gathering these, day after day. The knots were then tied to a Hickory withe. Burning for hours, such torches lighted the pioneer for miles through the forest at night. These flambeaux made ideal lights, too, for shining deer -- their eyes fascinated and illuminated by the flame while the hunter drew his bead upon them."

(excerpts from Donald Culross Peattie, *A Natural History of Trees of Eastern and Central North America*)

**Quick ID Tips:**

- Tufts of needles may dot the trunk
- 3-6" twisted needles in bundles of 3; needles are yellowish green and stiff but don't snap when broken
- Bark is red-brown and is deeply and irregularly furrowed

**Details:**

- This coniferous evergreen tree grows 40-60 ft. in a twisted or gnarled manner with an irregular crown and twisted branches. This pioneer species is often the first tree (along with the Eastern Redcedar) to vegetate a site after the site has

been cleared. The Pitch Pine life span is around 200 years, and cones can begin to form in as little as 3 years after the sapling is established.

- Bark is thick, red brown, and is deeply and irregularly furrowed, which results in long, divided, rectangular plates.
- The needles are 3-6" long, and typically around 4". The needles are yellow-green, stiff but not brittle, and are slightly twisted.
- Tufts of needles sprout from the bark on the trunk, one of its adaptations to fire along with thick bark that insulates the delicate cambium layer from heat damage.
- Cones often occur in clusters of 2-3 and are almost stalkless. The 2 1/2" cones have a flat base and are very prickly. The cones often persist on branches for over a year.
- The Pitch Pine is used for cover and nesting by birds such as the pine warbler, wild turkey, great-crested flycatcher, blue jay, black-capped chickadee, black and white warbler, Nashville warbler, and chestnut-sided warbler. Deer eat seedlings and new sprouts, and small mammals and birds eat the seeds.
- Indigenous North Americans, including the Iroquois, Shinnecock, and Cherokee, used pitch pine not only for canoes and its resinous pitch value but also for medicine to treat rheumatism, burns, cuts, boils, and as a laxative.
- Hardy to USDA Zones 4-7. Pitch pine can be found in the southern part of northeastern United States, from coastal Maine and Ohio to Kentucky and northern Georgia. Grows in many types of soil, but especially in dry sandy areas.



tree habit



cone



cone cluster



trunk bark



bark

#### Sources:

- Charles Fergus, *Trees of New England, A Natural History* (Globe Pequot Press 2005)
- David Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Trees* (Knopf 2009)
- Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinus\\_rigida](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinus_rigida)