



LONGLEAF PINE:

Longleaf pine is making a comeback these days. At the time the first European settlers came to America, it is estimated that longleaf covered 90 million acres or about a 140,000 square mile area of the Coastal Plain from southeastern Virginia to east Texas. By 1920, most of the virgin stands of longleaf had been cut, and by 1996 logging and agricultural conversion had reduced that to about three million acres. The mighty longleaf pine (*pinus palustris*), once king of the southern forest, had been reduced to an afterthought by the forest industry, replaced by loblolly and slash pine in the forester's tool kit.

Why did that happen? For several reasons, not the least of which is that longleaf pine historically was notoriously

difficult to establish artificially successfully. Twenty-five years ago, containerized seedlings were just coming on the scene and planting bareroot longleaf seedlings was a risky proposition. Survival rates of 50% or less were common. Also, longleaf has a reputation as a slow growing species. It tends to stay in its "grass stage," which is a defense mechanism against fire, and that can hinder its growth. A general lack of research on and understanding about longleaf pine also caused foresters and landowners to shy away from it as a species of choice.

But all that is changing, as longleaf is becoming the preferred species by many private and public forest



RIISING FROM THE ASHES

By David S. Lewis, ACF, CF

landowners. Why the change? Well, the disadvantages of longleaf outlined above have been overcome for the most part. Many landowners and foresters now recognize the multiple benefits that longleaf has to offer: fire tolerance, beetle and disease resistance, increased biodiversity, aesthetics, superior wood products (especially utility poles), high prices for pine straw, and lower levels of risk. Longleaf is especially attractive to those who want to integrate prescribed fire into their forest management. It is very fire tolerant, especially in its early years in the “grass stage.” This is a huge benefit in managing for quail because longleaf can be prescribed burned at a very young age without killing it.

We as foresters have also made great strides in achieving high survival rates and increase growth rates for longleaf pine. These gains have been made primarily by the use of herbicides to reduce herbaceous competition and through the planting of containerized seedlings. Nurseries throughout the South now know how to produce a consistent, high quality containerized seedling, and land managers have learned how to successfully plant them. Due to the efforts of The Longleaf Alliance and others, much more research has been done on longleaf which has created a treasure trove of information on its management that didn't exist before.

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Another factor driving the popularity of longleaf pine is the premium its straw brings in the marketplace. Longleaf pine straw commonly commands a price 50% higher than slash pine, and the demand for longleaf straw is more consistent than slash pine. It is the preferred straw for many higher-end users such as professional landscapers, hotels, resorts, country clubs, and other commercial entities. Many landowners in the north Florida area are cutting slash pine stands and replacing them with longleaf.

Twenty-five years ago, our firm, Southern Forestry Consultants, Inc., mostly confined our longleaf plantings to those sites that were too dry and sandy for any other species. Longleaf is very well adapted to those sites because of its long tap root that allows it to thrive in droughty conditions. However, changes to the Conservation Reserve Program that discriminated in favor of longleaf pine, coupled with

the improvements mentioned above, pushed the species onto much higher quality sites. These were formerly cultivated fields with high fertility and low to non-existent hardwood competition. We are seeing some impressive growth rates for longleaf pine on some of these sites.

Planting and managing longleaf pine does present some challenges. For example, its establishment is often more expensive than other pine species, primarily due to higher seedling costs; however, the challenges can be met and overcome with proper management. There is no doubt that establishing longleaf requires more attention, care, and diligence than planting other pine species.

We are beginning to see longleaf pine reappear on the forest landscape in the southern United States, and it is no longer in danger of becoming an extinct species. Foresters, land managers, and landowners now recognize the many benefits of longleaf and have exponentially increased their knowledge of the species and how to manage for it. We will never get back to that 90 million acres, but longleaf is here to stay in the forests of the South. ♦

KEYS TO SUCCESSFULLY PLANTING LONGLEAF PINE:

- 1 Precise planting depth is critical with longleaf but not so much with slash or loblolly pine.
- 2 Use high quality containerized seedlings from an established, reputable nursery.
- 3 Plant seedlings early. If soil moisture is good, this means November/December.
- 4 Employ a forester or planting contractor who knows how to plant longleaf pine.
- 5 Control grass and weed competition for the first two years after planting.
- 6 Monitor survival and supplement it with inter-planting, if necessary.



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A graduate of the University of Florida with more than 35 years of extensive forestry experience, Mr. Lewis' areas of technical expertise include timber appraisal and marketing, evaluation of pine pole products, longleaf pine establishment and management, and use of forestry herbicides. Mr. Lewis is a Registered Forester in Georgia and Licensed Florida Real Estate Associate. Contact Mr. Lewis at 850.997.6254.