

King William Pine

Athrotaxis selaginoides

This article follows a recent encounter with a smallish piece of King William Pine given to me and reminded me of the time when it was in common use when teaching Woodwork in Secondary Schools. Now it is difficult to obtain and is truly a specialist timber. It is no longer logged except for salvage. What a pity, because it was such a joy to work.

Derivation of names

From Greek '*athros*', crowded together, *taxis* - an arrangement, referring to the crowded nature of the scales on the cones.

selaginoides - derived from *Selaginella* a club moss and '*oides*', from Greek meaning like, referring to the club moss like-leaves.

Other names: King Billy Pine.

Related Species

There are three species in *Genus Athrotaxis*, all endemic to Tasmania.

The Tree

Because of its very specific habitat, few of us have ever seen this tree growing. I don't remember seeing it in any of our Botanic Gardens. The tree is of medium size, growing to 40 metres, with a diameter of one metre. The trunk is often buttressed, forked or curved with a small tufted crown. The bark is persistent over the trunk and branches, it is furrowed and slightly fibrous and is often thick soft and spongy. It is grey brown in colour, and red brown when first cut.

The trees are very slow growing and live to 500 years.



The leaves are superficially like those of Norfolk Island Pine, but are closely arranged, crowded and spirally formed. They are scale like, up to 20mm long and are slightly curved and pointed.

The fruit are technically called *strobili* and are basically small cones. Trees have both male cones (catkins) and small seed bearing female cones which are woody with pointed scales, growing up to 20mm diameter at the ends of branches. The trees produce cones about once every 5 years and produce numerous seeds.

Habitat

Limited to the mountainous and wetter regions of western Tasmania.

Timber

King William Pine is often said to resemble Californian Redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), but it's more solid. The sapwood is yellow and the heart-wood pink to reddish. It has distinct annual rings, generally close together to present an attractive figure.

The grain is sometimes wavy. It is a soft, light timber with a density of about 400kg per cubic metre (compare *Radiata Pine* - about 480kg per cub. metre). It is easily split, but is quite strong for its light weight. It has good bending qualities, is easy to plane and to work and seasons easily with little shrinkage. It is extremely durable and some pieces have been dated at about 1700 years old. The timber has no characteristic odour or taste.

Main Uses

Present use is restricted by availability. It is sought after for rowing sculls, sailing skiffs and soundboards for violins, pianos and other musical instruments. In the past it has been extensively used for weatherboards, bee-hives and in the mining industry in Tasmania. It is a stable and beautiful timber for furniture construction. Some years ago, Charles Greig displayed a beautiful hall table at our Urrbrae Exhibition.

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