

TREE TIPS

MAKING A PROFIT FROM PINE STRAW

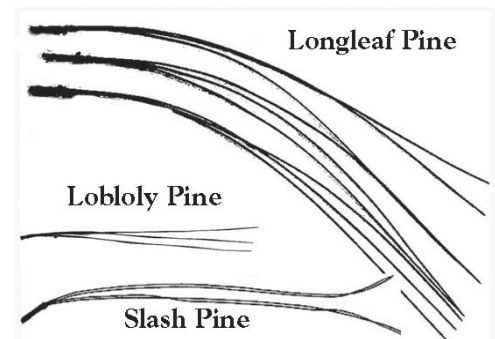
Do you have a lot of pine trees on your land? Would you like to make money from your trees? If so, you may want to rake pine straw.

What is pine straw?

Pine straw is the thick layer of needles dropped from pine trees. Most needles drop in the fall. Longleaf pine straw is best to sell because longleaf pine trees have very long needles.

Who wants pine straw?

Home owners and gardeners use pine straw to keep down weeds. Pine straw is purchased in bales. Buyers like pine straw that is clean. It should not have any sticks, leaves, pinecones, or branches mixed in.

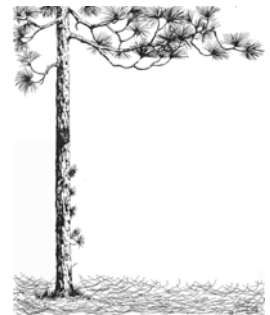


How do you make money from pine straw?

If you already have longleaf pine (or slash pine) on your land, you can rake the straw. Then you can bundle it into bales. You can also think about planting longleaf pine for the future (your county ranger at the North Carolina Division of Forest Resources can help you plant and manage pine trees).

How do you keep longleaf woodland healthy?

Getting a steady income from pine straw means keeping your woodland healthy. It is important to get rid of weeds and shrubs in your woodland. This will keep the trees growing well and keep the pine straw clean. Another way to keep your woodland healthy is to apply fertilizer.



Ways to fight weeds in longleaf pine woodlands

- Weed by hand. This is common when the trees are very young.
- Use chemicals. Herbicides (chemical weed killers) are powerful. They must be used very carefully.
- Use fire. When longleaf pines grow older, burning low to the ground can be very good for pine straw production. Foresters call these fires “controlled burns.” Burning requires a permit. You can get a permit only from your county forest ranger. Often the ranger will be in charge of the burn.
- Maintain a thick canopy. This prevents light from getting through the tops of the trees and helping weeds to grow.

Know how to manage your pine straw

You can begin to harvest pine straw as your trees grow older. When trees reach about 15 years, they begin to drop lots of pine straw. Healthy young and middle-aged trees produce much more pine straw than old or diseased ones.

How much straw will you get? This depends on many things:

- The age and health of your trees
- How many acres you have
- The quality of the land where the trees are growing
- How good the weather has been over the last several years
- How long your needles have been left on the ground.

A 15-year-old group of trees being raked for the first time can produce as many as 200 bales per acre. After you begin to rake every year, you can get up to 70 bales per acre. Each year the amount may change.

Know how to rake and bale your pine straw

Buyers like to buy pine straw that is fresh. The color should be yellow or red-brown. You will have yellow or red-brown needles if you rake at least every 2 years. If you wait longer than 2 years, the older pine straw will probably rot.

When to rake

Longleaf pines grow needles all the time. The needles stay on the branches for two years before they fall off. Most needles drop in the fall. The best time to rake the pine straw is in winter, after most of the needles are on the ground.

How to rake

The best way to collect pine straw is to rake the needles into rows between the trees. If there are wide open spaces between the trees, then a machine rake can be used. Hand raking will be easier if the trees are too close together or if there are many small trees and shrubs.

How to bale

Once the pine straw is raked, it can be baled with a mechanical baler. It is like baling hay. The amount of work you have to do depends on how well the baler works.

Pine straw bales are usually square and 28 to 36 inches long. They can weigh between 30 and 60 pounds. There is no official size, but an average bale weighs about 40 to 45 pounds.



Know how to sell your pine straw

Method #1: You do all the work.

Once you have raked and baled your pine straw and stored it in a convenient place, it is ready to sell. You can choose to sell the pine straw to individuals such as landscapers or gardeners. These buyers usually pay by the bale.

Method #2: Get somebody else to do the work.

There are several ways to have someone else do the work. You should always have a written contract to make sure that the buyer treats your land and trees with respect.

(1) Some buyers of pine straw may want to do the raking and baling themselves.

They will come to your land with machinery and workers. You will be paid by the total number of bales they collect.

(2) You can ask for sealed bids for your pine straw (especially if you have a lot of longleaf woodland). After you advertise that you want to sell, many buyers will come to bid against each other. You will be able to take the highest bid.

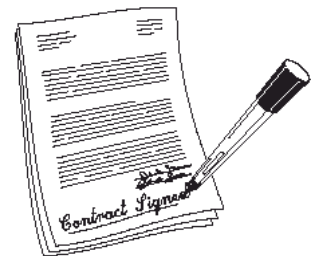
(3) You can rent your longleaf woodland to someone who will manage the woodland and the pine straw sales. This is like having a tenant on your farm. The person who rents your land (the tenant) will take care of all the details.

Visit the site while workers are raking and baling. This way they can see that you care about your trees and land.

Know how to make a good contract with the buyer or tenant

A written contract is important to make sure that you and the buyer understand each other. You may want to talk to a lawyer about writing a contract. You and the buyer should agree on the following items:

- The price per bale. This may change from time to time and from place to place. The price per bale should be for specific bale sizes.
- When the straw will be raked, baled, and picked up or delivered, and how long the contract will last.
- Who is responsible for any damage to your trees or property. This is especially important if you get someone to do most of the work for you.
- Any rules about pests (like fire ants) or diseases that affect the sale of your pine straw.



You can get help with making a contract for pine straw sales by talking to a consulting forester, your lawyer, a county ranger, or an Extension agent.



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2500 copies of this document were printed at a cost of \$636.28, or \$.25 per copy.

