

“SO YOU WANT TO COLLECT A YAMADORI”

THE ART, THE ESSENCE, AND THE SCIENCE OF COLLECTING

by Frank W. Harris

When I was asked to write this article, I wondered if I was qualified. I was perhaps at first intrigued and honored that someone felt me worthy to write about my thoughts and experiences on the subject – Yamadori, translated from Japanese means collecting plants from the mountains. The subject is one that has been well documented, with numerous articles and books with lengthy pictorial essays, chapters and internet links on collecting from the wild. One simply needs to Goggle collecting bonsai and discover the enormous amount of documentation that has been written on the subject.

So I asked myself – what could I contribute that has not already been documented? Certainly one recognizes the great collectors: Harry Hairo, Nick Lenz, Walter Pall, Andrew Smith, and George Heffelfinger.

So let me begin my journey to explore my passion to collect and share my thoughts and experiences on collecting. I am certainly not the first but will readily point out that collecting is not for everyone. It’s hard work, time consuming, and honestly requires a little luck and lots of experience.

So why then obtain material for our bonsai from the wild that is not always very attractive and in addition, looks as if it will take a full day of hard work.

- Many native species, often the best for bonsai training, are very difficult or impossible to find in a nursery.
- In the nursery, trees are cultivated to grow as rapidly as possible and generate money, which means that, in many cases will not have the desired quality.
- Trees grown from seed or cuttings need decades to reach a quality similar to that of trees collected from nature. Even then, there is an enormous difference in quality.
- The character of a tree only develops with age. A collected tree expresses the struggle for survival through its appearance and bark. This is very difficult to achieve with nursery seedlings.
- Collected trees have a unique history, written expressly for each one of them, making them more interesting and desirable.

Maybe the answer lies somewhere in that art enriches Life and makes it more interesting. No one would deny bonsai is a true art, but what really is it that captures us?

After many years in bonsai and all of them collecting, the answer for me still lies in the charm and sheer awesomeness of living ancient trees and our efforts to mimic them in miniature. I think however what is different for me, a collector, is what happens on the journey that is important and ultimately affects the outcome. In nature, an older tree often has a less than perfect image, which is caused by the passage of time and thus it can have wonderful imperfections – an incompleteness that makes it radically different and memorable. Herein lies the essence of collecting for me – such trees from the wild are often contorted in fantastic shapes, spectacular movement with fine lifelines – ancient survivors from another era. And best of all, our attempt to recreate some of the visual surprise is just the beginning.

Old trees reflect the passage of time and the effects of the controlling forces that made them. Collected trees often have a less than ideal location and weather conditions, experiencing extreme droughts to hard freezes, and severe erosion which all describe their survival in terms of sometimes amazing shapes.

It has often been said that Bonsai is about illusion and the charm of proportion. Certainly I cannot dispute that. But for me the true essence of Bonsai is found in collecting ageless trees with all the seemingly imperfect shapes and incompleteness. When I do find such a gem, I always find myself sitting down, reflecting on what the life story of such a tree must have been.

For me, collecting is the ultimate high.

As I alluded to earlier, collecting is not for everyone. In fact, the actual removing the tree from its only world for perhaps hundreds of years is often the result of years of searching and often many hours of hard physical work. And during these hours of searching I also spend considerable time just studying and photographing full-grown trees of the same species.

So you have made the decision to try collecting. Hopefully you have the benefit of an experienced person to guide and assist you. Your chief objective once you find a tree you intend to collect ought to be.... **keeping it alive**. And the chances of survival of the tree (which cannot be stressed enough) depend on:

- The experience of the enthusiast,
- The type of tree,
- The age of the tree,
- The special conditions of the location,
- The preparation of the tree,
- The tools used,
- The season of the year,
- The amount of rain or snow melt where it is to be collected (it has to have rained in the previous days and particularly the past six months for older trees,

- The difference in climate between the place where it was found and the location where it will be placed (the greater the change, the more danger for the tree),
- Care after collecting.

So let's begin.

After the monsoon rains and the rains in October and again in December/January feeder roots will start to sprout from the older part of the trunk. A list of tools and materials might include:

- A pair of lopping, both the long handled for big roots and hand shears for close root work.
- A folding pruning saw
- A large pick and round shovel
- A short handled mattock
- Several pieces of square and elongated burlap with suitable tying off material
- A milk crate or similar sized black nursery pot (should bring 2 or 3 sizes)
- Several gallons of water and a spray bottle
- And a pair of good leather work gloves.
- A pickle bucket for native duff and leaf mulch
- A camera and journal
- A small first aid kit
- And last but not least, a Permit to collect

And of the greatest importance remember to include that all important thermos of coffee, donuts, a hearty lunch and of course plenty of drinking water.

At home you might have prepared a wooden box or the smallest possible container to keep the soil from staying too wet. You should also have prepared your potting mix of 75 % washed pumice and/or decomposed granite or medium grit mixed with 25 % cactus mix (for organics/ microbes and some water retention during hot summer months). I also collect some ground duff from neighboring species for microrhizza and mix this in as well. When you get home you will be shaving some of the native soil off the ball, getting it down until most of the ball shows fine feeder roots. The mixture above will be used around the ball after it is placed and firmly secured in the pot/box. The tree should then be treated like a giant cutting with frequent almost hourly misting. One of the reasons junipers are able to survive in the harsh, dry climate they live in is their ability to absorb moisture through the foliage system. During the summer and winter most shallow feeder roots up and die, and possibly without this habit of "soaking up" the morning dew, many would not survive. Your collected tree will remain untouched in the growing box for one to three years while it recovers and builds

strength. Young trees should show signs of new growth in 2-3 months. With old junipers you may not see spring growth reaching 5-6 inches (spiking) until the following year. About a month after potting, give it a light feeding of fish emulsion. Freshly dug trees do not need too much soil water during this recovery period but the soil cannot dry out either. Letting the soil aerate promotes the growth of fine roots.

So you want to go collecting a prize tree.

Even before any digging I begin spraying the foliage with a water bottle and commercial sealant, such as Transfilm, to prevent transpiration during the next few weeks.

You want to begin by digging a trench well outside the trunk. Next, the nebari (exposed surface roots) are cleaned. No more weeds. So that you save as many rootlets as possible, as soon as you meet the first roots of the tree, stop and clean the soil. It should also say that I strongly recommend that you resist the urge to remove foliage. Hormone production in the foliage tips is essential toward the production of new roots. The root ball should be roughly round in shape with straight sides down to 12 to 14 inches, or about as wide as it is deep. Each time you find a big root it is necessary to cut it at its two tips on both sides of your trench with big pruning shears or a saw. When the root ball is free standing, start sheering the sides with your shovel until the tree and ball are standing on a small pedestal. You should be cutting any tap roots as you go, being careful to keep the ball intact. When you reach the point where the pedestal is at its narrowest, push a burlap square under the root ball and gently push the whole thing over into it. Next continue to shave some of the soil off from the ball taking it down until most of the ball shows fine roots and it will fit into a milk crate. With a saw, clean up the tap root. No roots can go beyond the profile of the root ball, or it would become unstable during handling. I like to continually spray the fine roots as I go. Wrap the ball immediately with the burlap plus a piece that wraps around the sides of the ball. Tie the whole ball off with repeated wraps of twine until the ball is perfectly solid. Lift the ball from its hole and place it in a milk crate that will further maintain the rigidity of the ball and provide handles for transport. And at last and of the greatest importance, remember to fill the hole back in, thus restoring the ground as if a hole had never been dug.

On a final note, if you have selected a juniper to dig its maintenance is said to be quite problematic. Both Walter Pall and Nick Lenz have decided that this is just a bonsai myth and having successfully grown them for several years, I agree. I have heard many people and often read that, 'Very rarely water the juniper as it is highly intolerant of moisture at the roots. It should be treated like a cactus.' My experience is radically different. The fact is, that our junipers can survive long periods of drought, but it is by no means advisable to actually withhold

water. When watered regularly and aggressively it grows and thrives amassing dense fine root balls. An absolute prerequisite is very coarse and well draining soil mix. In its first and second repotting in the next two years, the total removal of the original clay soil is a must or as soon as possible after the tree is 'spiking' which could take up to 1 year. In addition regular and rather aggressive feeding is also required. Omit one of these prerequisites and you are asking for trouble.

One last note on the subject of soil mixes. Akadama is not a good choice. It is of extreme importance that the soil mix is well aerated. Therefore, only particles must be used that will never decompose. I use a mixture of mostly medium lava rock and pumice, which is sieved to make sure that fine dust particles do not impair aeration. For smaller trees you can add rough peat or hard bark particles such as found in cactus mix.

In closing, a word of warning should be sounded: the supply of collectible native trees is not inexhaustible. When you go collecting, take only what you really want and can take care of. If there is a doubt in your mind whether you can get the tree out alive, leave it with its root system in undisturbed. It might be interesting to note that the Japanese are now importing the California and Rocky Mountain junipers because their supply of native collectibles has been almost completely exhausted.