

NOTES FROM THE KATHY SHANER BONSAI WORKSHOP

Tom Gatz

On December 3 and 4, 2010 three of us from the Phoenix Bonsai Society participated in this interesting workshop sponsored by the Scottsdale Bonsai Society. Friday Night was a demo on styling a large elm. Saturday morning was a hands-on critique of participant's trees and the afternoon was spent styling trees that participants brought in. Kathy has studied bonsai in Japan for many years. Here are some of the things that Kathy recommended.

RULES

Learn them, bend them.

Only the formal upright style requires strict adherence to the rules; in all other styles rules can be modified.

Rules like 1/3 trunk 2/3 canopy and height of first branch relative to height of tree, etc. are only guidelines, not gospel.

If everyone follows every rule for every tree, all of our trees will look alike and be "cookie-cutter" versions of one another.

TOOLS

She removed large crossing roots with a hammer and chisel.

She cuts branches back with a knob cutter.

She recommends only Masakuni jin pliers for working with wire.

WIRING

She wires branches very loosely with quite a bit of space between wire and branch.

Most people use wire that is too small for the job at hand.

Feel the tension in the branch to know when to stop bending, not your eyeballs.

Instead of wiring, use an appropriate length of a chopstick that is sharpened at either end and wedge it between the trunk and a large branch you want to move away from the trunk or between two large branches you want to spread apart. For smaller branches she uses a straight piece of wire with “U”-shaped openings facing out on either end as a wedge.

If you crack a branch while wiring, use Parafilm to repair it. It biodegrades over time so won't constrict the branch.

STYLING

Study really old trees in the natural landscape for inspiration; not the over-pruned, younger trees in our urban areas. Notice that the trees in nature don't always follow the bonsai rules.

Look at old bonsai calendar photos to study plant styles and pot combinations (both good and bad).

Styling and trimming is “a dance” with your tree. Let it grow for a while, bring it back in, let it grow out again, over and over, but each time less and less. This allows your developing tree to grow and thrive as opposed to one that is pinched back so much and so often that it languishes and always maintains a static, “cookie cutter” look.

ALWAYS check under soil to find the point at which the trunk starts to root before styling. Elevate the tree as appropriate.

Only work on or re-pot well hydrated trees because cut roots will not take up water for a while.

Keep moving around the tree during initial trimming, rather than doing a section at a time; this will maintain balance.

If in doubt, leave bigger branches on. If you change the style or lose a branch, you may need them later.

Before wiring, soften branches by running them through your fingers; always bend in the direction the branch is growing, not against it.

Temporarily leave a few long untrimmed branches on newly styled trees to minimize sucker production; strip most of the leaves off of these branches except near the tips.

Bar branches can be managed by drastically shortening one of them or bending them in different directions.

Even twisted branches look “young” if they are too round and smooth so rough them up.

When topping a tree, she doesn't like to hide the scar in the back but shows it off in front for a more natural look.

CASCADES

She likes the top/apex of the cascade to mimic the movement and direction of the cascade itself to capture the essence of age and not shoot upward or in a different direction like many of the standard cascades do.

DEADWOOD

Have a reason to keep deadwood on a tree.

She uses a root-cutter to create deadwood by cutting into it sideways and jiggling it.

She is not a big fan of lime sulfur or whitened wood. She prefers natural shades of gray, tan, yellow, brown on deadwood instead.

Don't use lime sulfur where there is less than 10 percent deadwood on a tree – it looks odd.

If the tree has lots of deadwood, peel off the bark to prevent moisture retention and rotting of the deadwood underneath.

She recommends water-based “PC Petrifier” to preserve deadwood. Minwax works but is not water-based.

Also use a wood filler with appropriate coloring to fill in holes after cleaning them out with a dental pick.

Tilt pot side-ways to apply wood hardener so that it doesn’t run down the trunk to quickly.

Hand tools are better than electric dremels for working deadwood if you want a more natural look and have more control over the result.

To scarify deadwood, moisten it first then brush it with a ½” or ¾” copper pipe brush (from plumbing dept.) to leave a nice grain in the wood.

Some deadwood CAN be bent IF you wet it for several days.

TREE MAINTENANCE

Use swamp cooler pads around pots to cool in summer.

Water-holding crystals are now available in pad form from stores that sell hanging baskets.

If a tree defoliates from stress or potting, bag it in the shade with a wet sponge inside to rehydrate it but don’t over-water it.

Can use an anti-desiccant to protect tree from cold temperatures, or after being bent or wired or scalded by the sun (“Anti-Stress 2000). Protect stressed trees from the wind.

FERTILIZER

Avoid chemical fertilizers; too many salts. They build tops but not roots.

Slow release fertilizers like Osmocot can’t be regulated very well and may keep dumping nitrogen on your trees when you don’t want it to.

She likes organic “Harmony Farms” brand and Fujiyama Organic Grow 4-6-2 from Dallas Bonsai on line. Vary what you use.

ROOTS

If you cut off a crossing root, leave the remainder of the root in the pot; it may grow into a new tree.

To join two roots together, trim off the outer layer and use cut paste (with the green top) to get them to grow together.

Don't elevate roots too high in the pot above the soil line; just enough to see the tops. She said that elevating your root too high is like going to a nudist colony – it is more interesting if you don't see everything.

TOP DRESSING

Avoid white gravel. Mix colors and sizes of material to look more natural.

POTTING

Use chopsticks criss-crossed over root ball and wired down to secure tree for less damage to the roots.

POTS

A pot with a thin, flanged lip will look shallower than one of similar depth with a blunt, rounded lip. The flange will also provide some shade to the pot's sides.

Darken light colored feet of a dark pot with a magic marker to make feet “disappear” and give the illusion of a more shallow pot.

She likes trees with shiny leaves in shiny glazed pots (even if they don't flower).

If you plan to buy pots at a bonsai convention (next fall in Riverside, Ca.)

bring a photo of your tree in its current pot along with the dimensions of the tree and pot, so they vendors/mentors can help with your selection.

MISC.

A stressed tree will create more bark.

Keep good notes on each tree; index cards work well; also photos.
Number your trees.

If a tree dies, pull it out immediately and examine roots to determine if it died from the bottom up or the top down. Cross-section the trunk to determine if rot moved up or down.

It's okay to have a few, but not too many funny or amusing styles in your collection. i.e. a tree with arms upswept like a dancer.