



Fujii Notes

Newsletter of the Phoenix Bonsai Society

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Phoenix Bonsai Society member Tom Gatz submits the following short article. In addition to his interest in Bonsai, Tom serves as a volunteer at the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix. This is an article Tom previously had published in the volunteer newsletter of the botanical garden.

MINIATURE DESERT TREES

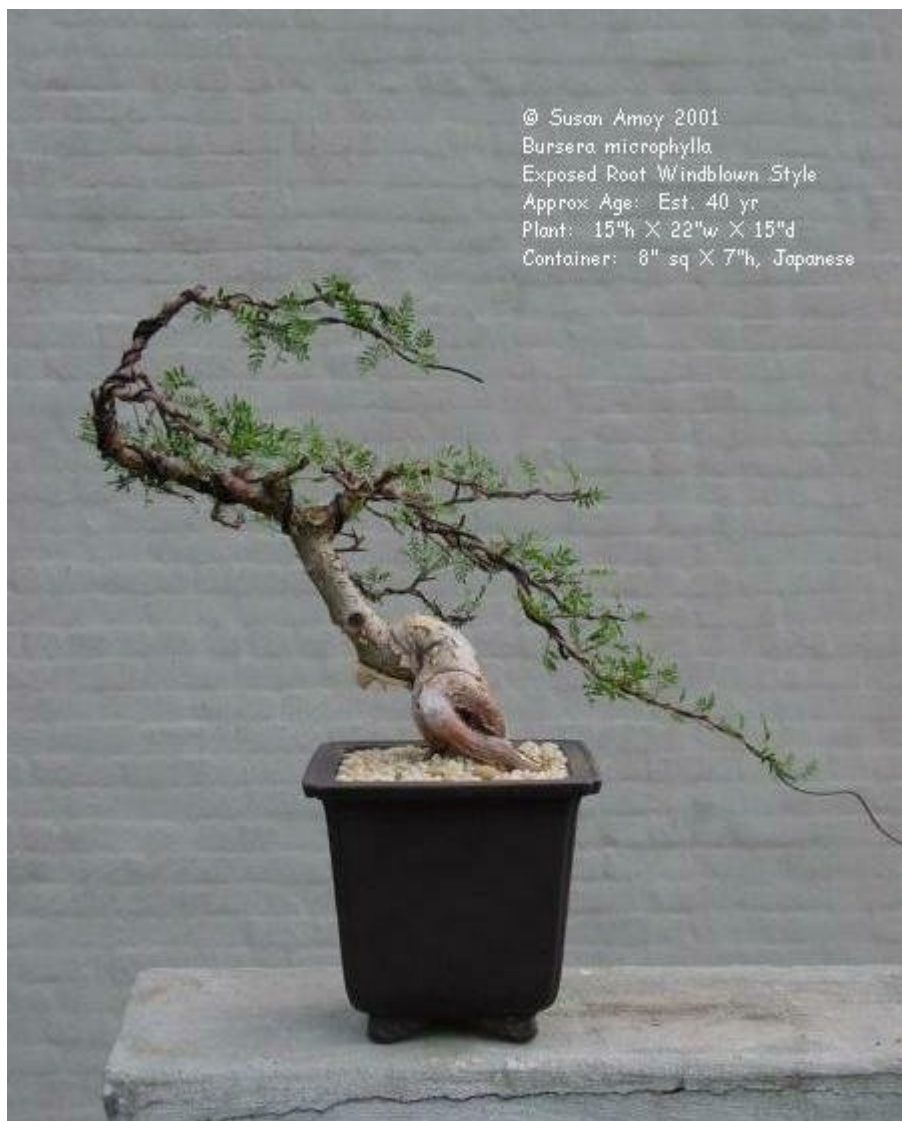
by Tom Gatz

A big drawback in having a relatively small backyard was that we couldn't fit in more desert tree species. Our remaining Argentine mesquite (the other blew over in a storm) now shades two thirds of our yard, leaving little space for other trees. Solution? I joined the two bonsai societies in town. I now enjoy growing many species of desert-adapted trees including elephant trees, palo brea, ironwood, velvet mesquite, Texas ebony, and rock figs with their exposed roots flowing over miniature boulders. Several shrubs are also beginning to take on interesting miniature tree forms in some of my pots, such as elephant food, Euphorbia misera, cascalote, Barbados cherry, bougainvillea, creosote, emu bush and Texas ranger. "Don't bonsai everything!" pleads my wife Barb.

Frowned on with concern by some plant-lovers with suspicions of plants being tortured in tiny pots, one tree book author even unfavorably compared the occasional root pruning of bonsai trees (which actually makes room for more soil in the pot) to the cruel and archaic practice of foot binding. In fact, no plant in my backyard gets as much care and attention as do these valued specimens pampered by bonsai enthusiasts. With proper care, your bonsai tree may well outlive you. One specimen at the National Arboretum is reputed to be over 380 years old! Not to be confused with whimsical topiary, the aesthetic goal in bonsai is to give the illusion of a tree of great age by developing a thick, weathered trunk and encouraging downward slanting branches and branch ramification by strategic clipping or temporary wiring. Sensei Leroy Fuji recommended leaving spaces in the tree for imaginary tiny birds to fly between the branches. Just about any plant with a woody stem can be grown as a bonsai, but the most realistic ones have small leaves or needles and thick, gnarly trunks. Potential places to find specimens with "character" are in the discount area of some nurseries and (with permission of course) from the yards of old, established neighborhoods that are undergoing renovation. Try to start with the thickest trunk you can find. Don't be in a hurry to put it in a bonsai pot. The best specimens often spend years growing in deeper "training" pots, where they more quickly develop the desired bonsai style.

Much of the knowledge about well-draining soil mixes and repotting techniques I've gained from the Botanical Garden has helped me in caring for my bonsai trees. Conversely, the knowledge

gained from the bonsai clubs has given me new perspectives on pruning and shaping my bonsai trees as well as my full-sized trees (my remaining big mesquite is acquiring a "windswept" style; artistic but also practical to better deal with the monsoon winds). Many bonsai enthusiasts struggle (sometimes successfully) to keep pines and maple trees alive here in the desert. I'm not that skilled so I like to work with the desert plants that should thrive here instead. Although not considered a true woody "tree" by bonsai purists, I think a great starter species is the succulent plant called elephant food (*Portulacaria afra*). It's a tough little plant that thrives in full sun with minimal water. Its only Achilles' heel is cold. Be sure to bring them inside if we ever get a recurrence of the January 2007 hard freeze.



The elephant tree (*Bursera microphylla*), native to Arizona and Mexico, is another great bonsai candidate. They often take on natural bonsai form where they cling to desert hillsides and get "pruned" by browsing animals and frost. They're usually available at the DBG plant sales if you get there early. A new, and likely controversial, book entitled "Bonsai Succulents" (2007) by Philippe de Vosjoli and Rudy Lime is loaded with intriguing photos. If you would like to learn more about this ancient living art, contact these local clubs: Phoenix Bonsai Society <http://www.phoenixbonsai.com> or Scottsdale Bonsai Society fairlee1@cox.net. (This article is modified and reprinted from the volunteer newsletter of the Desert Botanical Garden.)

Request for Assistance

From time to time our Web site generates questions and requests for assistance from people wanting to learn more about bonsai trees. These requests come both from people who have years of experience working with bonsai trees and from those who are exploring their interest in the topic. The questions range from very general to fairly complex. Several goals of the Phoenix Bonsai Society are to make available information on the culture of Bonsai and to provide educational opportunities for members and non-members. As we receive questions, they are referred to members who may have expertise in the given topic of the questions being asked.

We received a request for information from "Tim" of Gilbert.

Dear Sir:

I bought a Large Cork Oak still in its 15 gal. can in a nursery in Scottsvalley CA (by Santa Cruz). I planted it in an 18" terracotta pot and did well with it thru the summer of 1994 when I moved it to Gilbert AZ and my back - south facing patio. I double contained it in a pulp inner pot surrounded by a mix of pea gravel, vermiculite, and planter mix and kept it on my patio drip system successfully thru this summer. After appearing to do well thru the extended heat and extended length of the 115 degree days - the new growth and new and old leaves died off slowly but surely. I pruned it back and sealed off the branches until last month it has no branches that have any thin bark - only the thick cork like bark. I can't tell if they are alive or not?? When I dug out the root ball this morning the roots look viable, but I'm not reliable at that evaluation. Is it possible that the tree could send out new growth still? If you know of anyone that has experience better than you - please let me know or forward this to them If you could. I appreciate any help or info that you can share.

Tim

Frank Harris responded to this question and his comments were greatly appreciated by Tim. Frank's comments reflect his commitment to help others learn from his experiences. Frank's comments and suggestions may have value to the current members of the society

Hello Tim,

Perhaps I can shed some light on your question. If any one has answered your question with a different answer, I would be interested in hearing it. I am a collector of old oaks from the wild (100+ yrs) and some Southern Live Oaks. And, I lost my share in the beginning. I got them to the third year or so and one day they would be fine - the next - the leaves would crisp up light brown and the tree died. In that I had grown the entire root system from start - like a big cutting, the roots were super fine and hair like. During the summer heat, and because at the time I was planting in a course mix with only bark for organics, the bark in the third year would break down creating air pockets where the roots were. If I missed a single day without watering (maintaining constant moist soil), the roots dried up and no longer worked. I now water (using my loose mix) 2X day from April thru September. And I use all wooden boxes - 20 degrees cooler soil than terracotta pots (120 degrees on the roots against the side facing the sun) in the hottest part of the summers. Roots shut down at 80 degrees and die at 100 degrees. I also began to use a portable evap cooler blowing on the clay pots only to keep the soil temperature down. I also use a heavy, heavy gauge burlap square with a slit for the trunk, over the soil, which I wet in the morning of an extremely hot day. All that and we only have 100 days of 100 degrees. My trees also do not go fully dormant in the summer though. The secret for me since then is to use a really course mix (pumice, 1/8th in sand, and lava) with 30-50 cactus mix organics and make sure on hot days to keep the soil always moist. My oaks are in full sun all day. Most of the finest roots, interestingly, are in the 1-2 inches of 1/4 inch coarse drainage soil in the bottom of the pot. I also spray my oaks with the hose or rain water all the time, especially on dry windy hot days - which I believe is the biggest cause. The end tips of the leaves brown when this is the

case. This year I think I'm going to make stiff shade cloth "bags" to throw over the trees during extreme sun and dry wind. If you mysteriously lose just one branch - it's an early sign of an air pocket with dried up roots. Watch for white scale insects as well! If you see ants up and down the trunk, you probably have scale. I wish I could say I do more to maintain a more acidic soil, but I don't. I use as much rain water as I can. All that said, I think I lost my only Cork Bark to fertilizing during midsummer - before I did all the above.

Thanks to Frank for his excellent and thoughtful response to a question presented to the Phoenix Bonsai Society via the web. During the course of the year we have received a number of questions and all have received clear and appropriate replies.

Ownership and Artistic Credit in Bonsai, an article by Will Heath

In an earlier edition of Fujii Notes this season there was a brief discussion regarding the issue of artistic credit in the art of bonsai. The Art of Bonsai Project is an excellent forum for various topics and discussions related to bonsai. Members are encouraged to visit the web site, www.artofbonsai.org. On that site are a number of topic areas that have value and help with skill development, other areas are highly thought provoking and lead to new questions. One topic that has had some on going discussion focuses on the ownership of a tree that was developed and styled by another person. Members are encouraged to read the article by Will Heath as it makes strong use of more traditional art as a parallel and analogy to the bonsai form of art. The article can be located at www.artofbonsai.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1108. In the article Mr. Heath argues that Monet's "Water Lilies" have always been Monet's "Water Lilies" and it does not matter who happens to be the current owner of that piece of art. In a similar fashion, a John Naka tree is a John Naka tree regardless of who owns the tree or where it resides. Mr. Heath argues that if one purchased a tree designed by Walter Pall the new owner would invest time in watering, trimming, fertilizing, and re-potting the tree but the artistic credit would remain with Walter Pall. The argument becomes a bit obtuse when changes are made to a tree initially developed by another. It is difficult to determine when artistic ownership retains with the initial styling or with the person making the modification.

The Phoenix Bonsai Society 2007-08 Year in Reflection

This past year has been very busy for the Phoenix Bonsai Society. The Mentors provided excellent leadership in presenting monthly focus topics. The Mentors lead discussions and presented demonstrations about Formal Upright, Slant Style, Pines, Informal Upright, Fertilizer, Potting, and Soil, Broom Style Cascade Style, Photographing Trees, and Desert trees. The Ben Oki weekend in the fall stimulated significant participation by the membership. The workshop activity on Saturday was fully subscribed and many members participated in the Critique of Trees activity on Sunday. Many members took trees to the State Fair for display and the demonstration of an Informal Upright drew a large and responsive crowd. The PBS participated in a workshop activity with the Scottsdale Bonsai Club at their new location. The shows during Chinese Week and Matsuri were highly successful. All of the club trees were sold and the raffles generated high ticket sales. At Matsuri over 70 PBS member trees were displayed, all on stands and with accent plants. The trip to California was well-attended and all those who participated provided positive comments via a survey. Club members have participated in several activities at schools and civic events. This year we gained 23 new dues paying members and our current paid active membership roster stands at 61. The new members are very involved with the society and we actually had no available chairs at the Garden Center during several spring meetings. The club Mentors have been very active in helping the new members develop and hone bonsai skills. Their support and direction, and the energy of all of the members, contributes to the success of the

Phoenix Bonsai Society. As we end the 2007-08 season, we are looking forward to another enjoyable year; when we learn together, we grow together.

--- Ken Roberts

OTHER ARIZONA CLUBS

- » Bonsai of Scottsdale (est. 2000) meets at 1:30 p.m. on the First and Third Saturdays of the month at the Granite Reef Senior Center, Room 7, 1700 N. Granite Reef Rd. in Scottsdale, Cross streets are McDowell and Granite Reef. Contact Patricia Mitchell for more information (480) 575-5649, patmitchell2003@yahoo.com.
- » Tucson Bonsai Society (est. 1972) meets at 12:45 p.m. on the Third Sunday of every month at the Tucson Botanical Gardens' Porter Gardens facility, 2150 North Alvernon Way (near Grant). Contact David Meyer @ (520) 722-2000.
- » Southern Arizona Bonsai Enthusiasts (est. 2001) meet the FIRST SUNDAY of each month at 12:30 p.m. For information contact Doris Cavanaugh, doris.c@worldnet.alt.net / (520) 290-0522 , Pat & Thelma Patterson dezertrats@aol.com / (520) 825-9685 , or Kurt simonsk@pop.mindspring.com / (520) 321-4173.

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This newsletter is named in recognition of Hideo "Leroy" Fujii (1925-1998), student of bonsai for nearly fifty years, a founding member of our club, and our sensei / teacher for more than twenty-five years. Our club logo, courtesy of grandmaster John Y. Naka, is based on one of Leroy's trees. Two pages of some of Leroy's other fine creations can be found on our web site at <http://www.phoenixbonsai.com/LeroysTrees.html> .

"Learn from your trees: they are a reflection of you."

-- Leroy Fujii

PHOENIX BONSAI SOCIETY

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