



Fujii Notes

Newsletter of the Phoenix Bonsai Society

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Artists, not antique dealers

A short comment in the Bonsai Focus 2/2008 issue, on page 84 at the beginning of an article dealing with the restyling of a Juniper, seems to present an interesting opinion and point of view regarding the “rules” of Bonsai. Below is the intro to the article from Bonsai Focus.

“Because of our strong desire to follow the Japanese rules of bonsai, we are in danger of becoming production line bonsai makers, or perhaps antique dealers. This obsession with rules is funny in a sense, because they vary from one Master to the next, and also because the Japanese themselves transgress them so often.

So let us try to create freely and be true accidental artists and not dusty antique dealers who happen to specialize in the Asiatic arts. The juniper is a perfect example of this. It shamelessly transgresses some of the most firmly established rules.”

However, I believe it is wise to know and understand some, if not most, of the style and design rules. To paraphrase both John Naka and Leroy Fujii, knowing the rules allows you to break them for a reason and to make design decisions from some definite knowledge base. Many abstract painters make use of similar techniques and methods in fine landscape paintings. Rules are guidelines and their application may vary based upon the setting.

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This year we had several members make a donation to the Phoenix Bonsai Society. These donations help to offset the costs of having guest masters and presenters and to help with the costs of the California trip. All members should keep the PBS on their list of possible donor agencies. Your gift does help the society and on your tax return you will be able to claim your contribution as a donation to a not-for-profit agency.

Ben Oki Weekend

We had another successful Ben Oki weekend at Baker’s Nursery in November. All of the design sessions on Saturday were full. We also had a very strong turnout for the critique sessions with Ben on Sunday. In addition, we had a number of members at the front table all weekend designing Bonsai trees and talking with the public about the art of Bonsai and the Phoenix Bonsai Society. All who attended the events reported they had a great time.

Joan McCarter had some very good material at her nursery and several members used her trees when completing the workshop. Ben commented on the excellent quality of these materials. The better materials we take to design workshops result in better Bonsai.

Passing of a PBS Member

Jim Jeffries, a long time member of the Phoenix Bonsai Society, passed away mid-December at his home in Santa Clara, New Mexico. Jim had been a member of the Phoenix Bonsai Society for many years and was known for his willingness to help new members and to provide his opinions about any topic related to Bonsai. He served as a board member supporting our Club Events from 2002 until 2005. Jim continued to maintain his membership in support of the PBS even though he lived out of state. Jim will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

SO YOU WANT TO COLLECT A YAMADORI -- THE ART, THE ESSENCE, AND THE SCIENCE OF COLLECTING

by Frank 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, which translated from Japanese means “collecting plants from the mountains.” The subject is one that has been well-documented, with numerous articles and books having lengthy pictorial essays, chapters and Internet links on collecting from the wild. One simply needs to Google “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 contemporary collectors: Harry Hirao, Nick Lenz, Walter Pall, Andrew Smith, and George Heffelfinger, among many others.

Let me begin this journey exploring my passion to collect and sharing my thoughts and experiences on collecting. I am certainly not the first to do so, but here I will readily point out that collecting is not for everyone. It is 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 qualities which we desire.
- 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, as it were, 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 of 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 loppers, 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 (similar to a pickaxe);
- Several pieces of square and elongated burlap with lengths of 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;
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!

Oh, yes: 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 mycorrhizae -- the symbiotic fungi, present in 80% of all species, which colonize the roots of a plant either intracellularly or extracellularly and dramatically increase the mineral absorption capabilities of the plant's roots without the presence of disease-symptoms. This duff gets added into the soil mix as well. When you get home you will be shaving some of the native soil off the root 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. Be patient! 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 the tree 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 bottle of water 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 neabari (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. Also, 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 could 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 say 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 a 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. The reddish, naturally occurring, granular clay-like mineral 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 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.

Bonsai Education

Joan McCarter and Elsie Andrade were elected during the spring to serve Board level positions as Coordinators of Educational Activities. Joan and Elsie are currently planning a number of activities for later this year and for next season. Our newer members need education on how to keep their plants healthy in the desert so that they do not get discouraged. Our climate is unique; there are no books written on how to effectively grow bonsai in hot, arid climates.

Joan and Elsie are currently applying for certification as a GSBF basic bonsai teacher. The Golden State Bonsai Federation has a formal process for certifying teachers and has a corresponding curriculum to use in teaching. Joan and Elsie plan to develop a new members training program to follow the outline and requirements of the GSBF basic bonsai teaching. They will also follow the GSBF teaching recommendations. It is anticipated that we will also find additional opportunities to coordinate workshop and teaching activities with the Scottsdale Bonsai Club.

Joan and Elsie are working on a number of ideas for classes to assist members in gaining and refining skills. These ideas include having several three-hour workshops on a specific species of tree, and having longer duration workshops for intermediate and beginning students. These workshops would take a tree from the selection stage through final potting.

Joan and Elsie report they will keep the Japanese style in mind when sharing their knowledge with curious students, making sure to follow the GSBF teaching methods while extending their own views of our very own desert trees. They will keep in mind the students' levels of understanding, encouraging them to take part in the designing of their tree.

Some of the basic skills Joan and Elsie plan on covering in their workshops will include:
Bonsai styles

Selecting stock to work with

Care and upkeep of tools
How to prune
Shaping of the tree
Home care of Bonsai

Selecting pots for trees
How to wire
Potting
Displaying trees

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 (1914-2004), 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

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