
MONTHLY TIPS

(Ed.'s Note: The following article was originally published in the April 2006 issue of "Bonsai News", the newsletter of the Greater Louisville Bonsai Society. It was written by George Buehler, the editor of that newsletter. I must confess that I have made many of these same "mistakes".)

Over the years, I have learned a lot about bonsai from the mistakes I made. We all have made mistakes whether it was in the form of cutting off the wrong branch, using the wrong pot or some other mistake. Since one of the purposes of this journal is to be a learning tool, I thought I would list some of those that I have made – not necessarily in order of importance!

To much of a hurry

Quite often I found that in order to get a bonsai project done – whether repotting or trimming – I would hurry. Quite often this hurrying led to problems that had to be corrected when I wasn't in such a hurry.

MORAL: Before you start that repotting project or restyling, make sure you have time to complete it. Also, if you are tired, don't start – see below.

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Starting a bonsai project when you are tired

When I was working full time, I would come home after a hard day knowing that I needed to do something to my trees. As with most people, when I am tired, I don't think with the same 'brain power' that I do when I am fresh. This of course, can cause mistakes to happen that you don't realize you made until later when you reexamine your work. Sometimes the mistakes are so obvious that you wonder how you could have done it. The answer is quite simple when you examine the circumstances – you were tired. Of course, there are many things that have to be done – whether tired or not – but try to plan ahead and do the menial things, like watering or rotating plants, when you are tired.

MORAL: If you have had a hard day, whether at work or just because you had to work outside all day, postpone that restyling project for an early Saturday morning project and just examine those trees – with your note pad – and plan ahead.

Not reading about a tree type

I have often picked up a tree at a bonsai nursery or at a garden store because it looked good, or could look good, or I simply thought I needed it in my collection. When I got home and pulled my reference books, I learned that it would only marginally grow in our climate, that it was a difficult tree to grow, or that it required special treatment or growing conditions.

MORAL: Before you buy, make sure you research the tree to determine its growing requirements or to decide if you are willing to put in the amount of work needed to keep it growing and looking like a real bonsai.

Buying on a whim

This mistake goes hand in hand with not knowing about the tree. I have gone to several bonsai suppliers and seen some unusual trees and picked up something. When I got home and examined the tree carefully, I found that the tree had more problems than I originally thought. Often these problems can be corrected over time, but just as often they are not correctable (i.e. that poorly pruned scar or branch in the wrong place). Ask yourself, do I really need that tree, will it make a good bonsai or is it something that you just 'want'.

MORAL: When you purchase a tree, examine it carefully and make sure you are getting something that will make a good tree and doesn't have more problems than you can correct in a reasonable time.

Buying stuff

Bonsai is a long term hobby. We know that it will take years to grow a good tree – maybe more than we have left in our lifetime. However, buying a one year old start will probably just be "stuff" for the rest of your life. I know that I have done that a number of times. If you understand, prior to buying it, that it will just be a tree and not a real bonsai, then go ahead. You can learn a lot by experimenting with "stuff", but be realistic. Also be realistic about the potential of a tree. More often than not, this "stuff" will always be "stuff" and not true bonsai. When your collection gets larger, you should be ready to dispose of this 'stuff' without a lot of pain, and hopefully you have learned something.

MORAL: Bonsai is supposed to be both fun and a learning experience. Experiment with the "stuff", but keep it to a minimum so that you can spend more of your limited time on the trees that have more immediate potential.

Not teasing out roots properly

During transplanting I either didn't remove all the dirt or didn't straighten the roots properly. This is not a major problem but with proper placement of the roots a better looking tree can be obtained.

MORAL: Take your time to make sure you tease out the roots and examine them carefully before you remove the longer, larger roots. Watch for the placement of the surface roots. This will pay off in the long run.

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Dirt removal

This could be a major problem. On a boxwood I picked up several years ago from a home supply center (something I have recommended not doing – but that is another story), I didn't remove all the soil around the trunk on the first or second transplanting. Later, when I learned better, the soil was rock hard, and I have been trying to get it out over the last several transplantings and still have some of it left to get rid of. When you examine the roots, also examine the soil around and below the trunk.

MORAL: When you get a new tree and do the first transplanting, take your time, look at the roots carefully, and make sure you get all the old soil out. If you purchase the tree from a bonsai nursery, this may not be a problem. However, if purchased from another type of store, do a thorough job in getting the potting soil out.

Pot placement of tree

I don't know how many times I have read about the proper placement of a tree in a pot. You know the routine – slightly back from the horizontal center line and slightly off the vertical center line. Even after careful planning, and hopefully careful working, I have stepped back and it hits me at the first look. It is not in the proper position, or the slant of the tree is wrong. Maybe you say it's not that big of a thing – and if you are new to bonsai maybe it won't be. However as you look at the tree day in and day out during watering for instance, you will see it, and you know you did it wrong.

MORAL: After you set the tree in the pot, step back and make sure it is in the correct spot, then go ahead and tie the tree into the pot. Step back again and make sure it still is in the correct place and the angle is still correct – if not, correct it then. Then put the soil in and work it around the roots and step back again. Is it still correct? If not, read the next section.

Setting a tree and knowing it was not correct and then being sorry for not correcting it then and there

As with the previous section, what do you do when after working in all the new soil, you determine that the tree is not in the proper position? Do you start over or just ignore it and say you will correct it during the next replanting? I know I have said just that and regretted it all year. It is better to take the tree out of the pot and redo it to get the proper placement or correct angle.

MORAL: If you determine that the tree is not correct, repot it then. You won't regret it if you do, but you probably will if you don't.

Putting tree in wrong pot – too small or too large

I have spent a lot of time trying to determine if a particular pot complimented a particular tree. Even after doing this, when the tree was put into that pot, it just didn't look right. I haven't figured out how to eliminate this mistake. Perhaps I just don't have the eye for the aesthetics. Use several different styles and colors if you have them before deciding on the one to use.

MORAL: Spend a lot of time trying to envision how a tree will look in a particular pot. Place the pot in front of the tree to get a better idea of how it will look in that pot. Try several different pots before you decide on one.

Not keeping up with trimming to get ramification

A tree always looks better when it has a full flush of leaves. To get this flush of leaves, you need to develop ramification. If you don't keep up with the trimming, you will simply get elongated branches. You may need to have longer branches; but to get the needed leaves, you will need to trim – maybe as much as once a week or more often, depending on the growing conditions of your tree. I have overlooked this simple task several times and found that it took quite a while to get the tree back in control.

MORAL: Always spend a few minutes a day examining your tree and pinch or trim out that new growth when several leaf pairs have formed. As you do, you will gradually develop a much improved tree.

Using stainless screws in stands

I built my own stands. In the first one I built, I used regular screws. Due to the constant exposure of water, the screws started corroding the first year and quickly gave way. I had to replace the stand and started using either coated deck screws or stainless screws. The stainless screws are about twice as expensive, but they last longer than the pressure treated wood.

MORAL: If you want to keep your stands looking good for a long time, use stainless screws. You'll be happy you did. Also make sure you treat your benches regularly with a good water repellent. You could always use a special wood like cypress, but I would rather use the common pressure treated wood which is much cheaper and spend the savings on better bonsai.