

MONTHLY TIPS

(Ed's. Note: The following is an article written by Ron Martin, proprietor of. Tokonama Bonsai in Summerville, South Carolina. Mr. Martin is a frequent contributor to several bonsai internet forums and has had several articles published in the ABS Journal.)

NURSERY STOCK: Selecting Something to Start With

So where do I start? I have read almost all the books. Looked at a zillion pictures. Just what kind of pre-bonsai do I need to create a masterpiece? If I want to create a beautiful bonsai can, I start off with just any thing? A maple, after all, is just a maple. So all I need to do is get one and, presto, a few whacks and a bit of wire later one has, or should have, a masterpiece? Sounds simple...

What happened? I did have all the pieces-parts to do the job but, somehow it just did not work out. How could this happen? Wish there was a simple answer to this. None comes to mind but I do hope that the following helps a bit.

First, let me say that all trees are pre-bonsai. Every nursery has lots of pre-bonsai lined up in all those plastic nursery containers. A walk in the woods will yield plenty of pre-bonsai that can be dug up. They are easy to find. Pre-bonsai are everywhere. They just need a little work to become at least something.

Problem is sorting through all those pre-bonsai's and finding the potential bonsai among them. Lots to chose from but very few correct choices to make. A bit of time spent in the selecting process goes a long way.

Just what turns a "pre-bonsai" into a bonsai? More, importantly, what makes some not a good selection? How do we find the potential bonsai among all those possibilities?

Lots of answers to this question. None of them are all that easy to give in a few short paragraphs. Whole books could be written on the subject and still not cover it completely. It might be easier to tell you what to stay away from than to tell you what is good.

Bonsai is a time consuming art form. One makes a few cuts then waits for the tree to catch up. Then we use some wire and wait some more. Try as we may that tree will not be forced to grow faster that it wants to.

Styling a tree does damage the tree. Hopefully this is constructive, well thought out, but it is still damage to the tree. Cuts take time and energy to heal. What we do to the little bugger does slow down the growth process. Anything else that also slows down this process should be avoided at all costs. At least during the styling process.

Sick plants are bad. They slow down the growth process more than anything. Time must be spent getting it healthy again before we can start. Working on a sick one usually means disaster. If you do find that the sick thing in front of you has potential, then make sure it has enough to make the time spent in getting it back to healthy is worth the effort. Something to think about when you are tempted to save that half dead poor thing in one of those chain stores.

Sloppy pruning cuts, wire marks, poor graft unions and large amounts of dead wood are all good indicators of a bad choice. They all take time to correct and heal. Poor graft unions are one thing that you will be stuck with forever. Poor pruning cuts, etc, can be fixed, but again that takes extra time.

Time is a valuable commodity, only the young can afford to waste it, and even their supply is limited. Don't waste it on a sick or poorly formed tree. Get something healthy. You will do enough to the tree to slow down the process all by yourself. You don't need any extra help.

MONTHLY TIPS (CONT'D)

But what makes for a good choice?

Trunk

Most important, and what takes the longest to grow, is the trunk. Does it have good taper? Does the shape suit your needs? Is it pleasing to look at? Growing a nicely shaped trunk takes time and, unless you are growing from seedlings a poorly formed trunk will always be a poorly formed trunk. Basically, if the trunk is small enough to bend with wire then it is going to be a long range project. Do you want to wait that long? Look closely and make sound decisions based on realistic goals.

The root spread or Nebari

Is there one and does it match the trunk? Big question. Sometimes you have a great Nebari and a great trunk, but they both go in different directions. Not an easy thing to correct.

Branches

It is better to have too many. You can always take off what is not needed. That is easier than putting them on. Heavy branches at the top and thin branches at the bottom are always a problem. So look closely.

Growth habit of the plant

Know the growth habit of the tree. One that wants to grow prostrate will not make a good formal upright and one that wants to grow upright will not make a good cascade. You will always be fighting to make the tree do something it doesn't want to do. Use its natural growth pattern. It is a lot easier that way.

- Domestic trees are always better than imported ones. Dwarf varieties are always preferable over the standard ones. Just a short note here. By imported trees I don't just mean trees that have come in from Japan, Korea, etc. Trees that have been brought in from a climate different than your own falls into the same category. Trees do not know borders, just climates.
- Fruits and flowers will not reduce in size. Colors will not change. Look hard at these things, you are stuck with them for the most part.
- Look at the size of the plant you're working with. A six inch plant will take years to make into a three foot tall masterpiece. Taller, however, can be cut down to size, the offending scars hidden and a nice piece completed in a shorter time.
- When you think about it the choices are not all that hard. The stock you start off with, to a great extent, will make the bonsai. Bad will get you bad and good will get you better. You just have to think about what you are doing.
- Spend some time, a lot of time, in the initial selection of your material. Look closely and study it hard. If you can't see the tree in it then DON'T BUY IT.
- Continue looking until you find that perfect specimen. Pass up the pre-bonsai and go for the potential bonsai. Don't waste your time, use it wisely.
- Decide what you want the finished product to look like then go in search of raw stock that will give you a chance of achieving these goals.