

MAY 2006

Bonsai News

allow us to collect small trees on county land. May 27-28 seems to be the most probable weekend. Yes, it's over Memorial Day, but that will give you an extra day to enjoy our northern woods!! Please contact Kris Ziemann ASAP at 262-512-1228 or hagr8d@mac.com if you are interested. Costs will be driving there, food and lodging. Trees are free!!

VOLUNTEERS

URGENTLY NEEDED!

State Fair is coming up quickly. REMEMBER... There will be no meeting in July, so bring your calendars to the May and June meetings prepared to sign up for Sate Fair Tree sitting.

NOVICE CLASS Nursery Crawl

Members of the NOVICE CLASS - Remember the Nursery Crawl - Saturday, May 6, at Minor's (just north of Good Hope Rd on 76th Street) from 9:00 to ??? RAIN or SHINE! Bring gloves, chopsticks, and wear boots (it's a bit muddy in the aisles). See you there.

MAY MEETING - BYOT with Ted Matson

Bring your trees to our Tuesday evening meeting May 2nd. The members of the Master's classes will be there to help you with styling (no repotting at this meeting, please). We'll also have a display of trees that the Master's classes participants are working on. Ted Matson will also be available for his insights into your trees. Limit your trees to 2 or 3 so that all have ample opportunity to work. Please remember your tools. We'll see you then!

May Meeting - BYOT with Ted Matson

Start grooming your tree(s) for the Club Show in June. We have 5 different categories: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Open and Youth.

You will need to be ready to fill out information cards at the meeting - so please be ready to supply common name, botanical name, age, etc. for your tree.

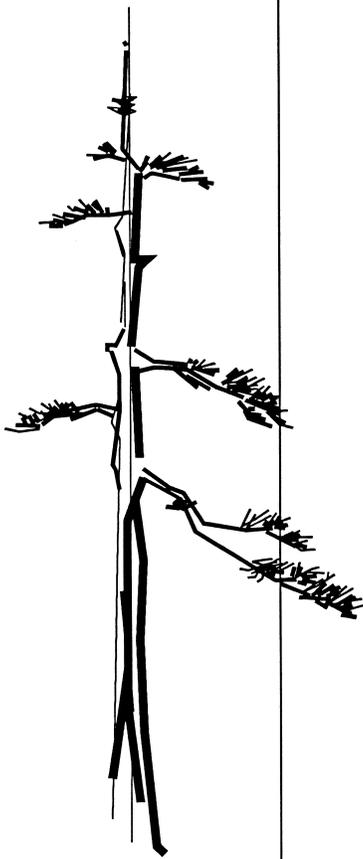
Collecting Trip - FREE

By Kris Ziemann

Are you ready for a collecting trip to Northern Wisconsin (around Hurley)? Milt Mandelin has been working with the forestry service to

MBS Meetings and Information Line:

The Milwaukee Bonsai Society meets on the first Tuesday of the month at 7 p.m. at Grace Lutheran Church, 3030 W. Oklahoma Avenue. Call the MBS Voice Mail/Message System at (414) 299-9229 to learn about upcoming



*Milwaukee
Bonsai Society*

*P.O. Box 198
Brookfield, Wisconsin
53208-0198*

*Information Line
414-299-9229*

KRIS' KORNER

This is a busy time of year. Lots of repotting going on. Toting trees in and out of storage when the nights get too cold. All the reading I did over the winter can be put into action now.

We had a wonderful novice class last week. We worked on Ficus Burt Davyi procured from Florida. Lots of beautiful creations walked out the door with our participants. SEE PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE!

Please bring your calendars to the next few meetings. We'll need to enlist your help for upcoming events (State Fair especially).

Also, make an effort to sign up as a volunteer for the MABA 2006 convention (June 21-25). You don't have to know anything about bonsai. Just have a good attitude and be willing to answer questions and give directions. See John Moore if you have any further questions.

***And another note about the convention - would anyone wish to help us find items for our daily raffles? Possibly gift certificates from local businesses, restaurants (for our local participants). Or a business that would donate items (Kikkoman donated little bottles of soy sauce at our last convention!! :o) Please see or call Michelle Zimmer. We'd appreciate the help!

Kris



2006 Club Events Calendar

April

Sat/Sun 29-30 - Master's Class

May

Tuesday 2 – Club Meeting BYOTree

Saturday 6 - Novice Class Nursery Crawl

Saturday 13 - Novice Class #4

June

Tuesday 6 -Club Show + something special

Thurs - Sun 22-25 – MABA/Milwaukee
Convention

July

Tuesday 4 – NO MEETING

Saturday 8 – Wauwautosa show

August

Tuesday 1 – Club Meeting Slab Making
and Muck Party

Thurs-Mon 3-13 STATE FAIR SHOW

Programs and dates for other activities have yet to be finalized – STAY TUNED!



Photos by Jean Sher

Development of Bonsai by Houston Sanders

As bonsai practitioners, we experience numerous workshops, club activities, demonstrations and conventions emphasizing the styling of raw material into “instant” bonsai. This makes for dramatic, crowd-pleasing presentations, but I believe that this kind of activity is too heavily emphasized. As a newcomer to bonsai, it was certainly my impression that you started with nursery trees and immediately made them look as bonsai-like as possible. To style them, you removed 90% of the foliage, wired the remaining branches, then transplanted the pathetic, half-dead remnant into a bonsai pot at the first opportunity. And after 50 years, your little nursery tree with a ½ -inch trunk will become a 3-foot-tall specimen with a 6-inch trunk. NOT!

While sometimes “instant” bonsai is a valid approach, I have found over the years that most trees developed in this manner were soon shoved to the back benches of my collection and ignored (if they survived!). While others buy nursery trees and immediately wire and trim them into bonsai, I haven’t done that for years. In most cases, it isn’t worth the time unless you increase the potential quality of the material by growing it in the ground for a few years.

When time permits, the best way to create a quality bonsai is to develop it one step at a time. Where you start depends on the level of development of your raw material. If your raw material is inexpensive (the only kind I buy!), it almost certainly ain’t ready for a bonsai pot. So forget about the pot and grow your tree as a pre-bonsai. In developing our own bonsai, we should keep in mind that there is no such thing as a finished bonsai. Therefore, why not take all the time that we need?

First, develop the trunk and root base. The trunk development is often the limiting factor in the potential quality of a bonsai. There are two ways to get a bonsai with a thick trunk, good roots and taper. You can either grow a tree to develop these features in the ground or in a large container such as a wooden box, or you can buy expensive raw material that someone else has developed for you. Once a tree is planted in a bonsai pot, the trunk development is done. Thin-trunked bonsai do not grow into thick-trunked bonsai. A “bonsai” with a ½ inch trunk will never be more than a small shohin tree, unless you speed up the trunk development. So before any tree goes into a bonsai pot, its trunk size, root base, and taper must be very close to the desired final size.

Ways to grow a trunk (and not look like an elephant)

Here is a small tree with a board tied directly underneath the base to flatten the root system and force growth outward instead of down. It is important to tie the tree to the board with something biodegradable, like raffia or jute twine, or the ties cut into the roots. You can’t beat this technique for developing trunks. Trees grown in this manner thicken very quickly at the base and form beautiful tapered trunks.



Unfortunately, with anything but a small sapling, the existing roots may not allow the board to be tied directly below the trunk. Even so, it is still effective to place a board or stone below these trees and gradually flatten the root system. The next photo shows the same tree planted in the ground. I plant these so that the entire root system is covered with at least ½ inch of soil. Roots thicken much faster underground.



Here is a tree that was grown in the ground using the root-flattening board. This is a pagoda tree (*Sophora japonica*) that was grown from a seedling. After the first year, a board was placed under the roots. The tree was grown in the ground for a total of 6 years. To obtain balanced root development, the tree was dug up and roots were pruned after 3 years.



This is a long way from a finished tree, but maybe not as long as it appears. Branches can be developed rather quickly, while trunks take many years. They don't all come out this way – this is my most extreme example!

The next photo (following page) is an example of a tree that came became an “instant” bonsai as soon as it came out of the ground. This larch was started from a small sapling with a ½-inch trunk. This tree was grown much like the tree above, but I was able to take advantage of the larch's growth pattern to develop the branches while the trunk was growing. The larch has a fast growing, dominant apex. In good conditions, the apex grows 3 or 4 feet per year, while side branches can be kept small.



So trunk thickness and taper were developed by letting the top grow unrestrained, then pruning back to a small side branch each spring. In this way, each year's growth extended the trunk height by a couple of inches.

The low branches were pruned several times a year to keep them from getting too thick. After 6 years, the tree was placed in a bonsai pot. Soon, the branches were wired and it became an "instant" bonsai. Now it is ready for development of the mature bark and branches needed for a good specimen. (Note: the white stuff is Dry-Stall, a new Ted Matson-recommended grit material now available in Milwaukee!)

Building Taper in a Box

The previous examples are meant to show the trunk development that can be achieved in a relatively short time from very small starting material. Many nursery trees or collected trees already have the thick trunks. But when larger material is reduced to bonsai height, it often becomes a stump with no taper and few branches. Most of the time the roots will also be unevenly distributed and too large for a bonsai pot. In these cases, pre-bonsai development must focus on developing the root base and obtaining a tapered trunk. For me, development of large material works best in a wooden box. A large and relatively shallow box allows good growth and drainage, and can be filled with good bonsai soil that encourages a strong, dense root system.



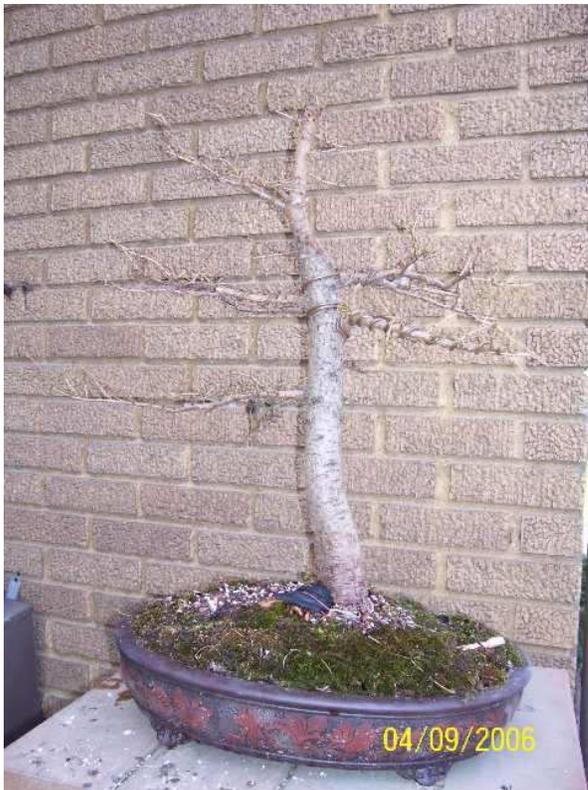
For this technique, the lower roots of the tree should be removed, leaving enough roots to easily support the tree in a flat root ball with a height of no more than 6-8 inches. A tree grown in these conditions will soon have a well-developed root system that can be cut back to the size of a bonsai pot without endangering the tree.

A large yew grown in a box to develop a healthy & compact root system

While the root system is developing, you can also improve the taper of your future bonsai. Two ways to accomplish this are:

- 1) **Grow-the-apex method:** Add height to the tree by repeatedly letting the apex grow several feet, then cutting off all but a few inches of the new growth, as previously described.
- 2) **Sacrifice branches:** Allow lower branches unrestrained growth, while pruning the upper branches back hard. Remember, each section of the trunk thickens in proportion to the amount of growth above it. So low branches thicken only the lower trunk, while unrestricted growth of the apex thickens the entire trunk.

When is the taper sufficient? The easy answer is when the trunk has a believable line. That is, the eye follows the trunk from the base to the apex with no sharp visual breaks that catch your attention and break the illusion that you are looking at a natural tree.



Here is another larch to illustrate development of taper. The tree was collected with a large trunk and good root system, but it was 10 feet tall! After cutting it down to bonsai size, there was little taper apparent. When it was collected (in spring), the larch was cut to a flat-topped stump, and placed in a growing box. It responded by sending out many new buds from the trunk. The buds developed quickly into small branches, and around mid-summer, one of the branches was chosen to be the new apex. The trunk was sawed diagonally at about a 30-degree angle to connect the new apex with a side branch. The apex was then allowed unrestrained growth to develop taper and heal the scar.

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Three years of growth in a box has accomplished healing that would have taken decades in a bonsai pot!

Remember, if you are chopping a thick trunk, cut diagonally between two branches. Here is an example of what happens when there is no side branch... The trunk dies back opposite the cut, creating an unintended shari almost to the roots!



Once the desired trunk size is achieved, then work on the branches. In many cases, branches developed during the period of trunk growth will not be very useful in the final design. As we all know, good bonsai branches should be no more than half the thickness of the trunk, and the upper branches should be thinner than the lower ones. Any branches that will not fit this pattern should be removed once the trunk development phase is completed. You might end up with a stump, but it should be a thick, nicely tapered stump.

Just like the trunk, the branches should be developed one-section-at-a-time. Pre-bonsai branch development should focus on getting branches in the right places, with acceptable size, exiting the trunk at the proper angle. Any detailed wiring of pre-bonsai branches is probably a waste of time. Just wire the initial 2 inches to establish consistency between the exit angle and direction of the branches.

It has been the intent of this article to show some actual trees and describe their long-term development and the methods used. Unfortunately, we don't see slow development methods taught in workshops or demonstrations, so all I can show is what I've learned through reading and trial-and-error (fortunately, I don't have to show you most of the errors!) As I continue to gain experience in bonsai, I have found that the real enjoyment for me is in the process, not the product. I find much more satisfaction in developing a tree into a bonsai over time than to simply purchase a "completed" tree and maintain or improve it. Each tree need not be beautiful or impressive – it only needs to have a plan. And a good tree often requires a 10-year (or more!) plan. To me, there is more excitement in seeing trees improve and progress each year than there will ever be in the short-lived infatuation with an "instant" bonsai.