

View from Here #1

Work or Wait?

By Jack Wikle

As Jack Douthitt, our visiting artist, pointed out last month, it's very easy to become complacent, to remain a perpetual beginner in our bonsai art. So, if you find yourself less than satisfied with your trees --- I'm guessing this is true for most of us --- then it is probably time to get to work. Or is it?

Just because your tree needs work doesn't necessarily mean it needs it right now, sometimes it will be better to wait. Remember, the art of bonsai is the art of balance, not just balance in design but balance in horticulture and lots of other things. The bonsai balance most under publicized, it seems to me, is the balance the successful grower practices between patient nurturing and audacious styling --- too much of either can be a major mistake on your most promising material. When should one be bold and when should one wait?

I can't emphasize too strongly that the trees we work with --- like all other living things --- are survivors, the offspring of survivors. They are "genetically programmed to live" if given a chance. To give them that chance, it's helpful to understand that a tree is in the "energy business" and to be very conscious of carbohydrate balance and its impact on all those other balances. A tree survives by capturing energy from the sun in the form of carbohydrate. Some of this carbohydrate is burned to meet immediate energy needs. Some is used as structural material. The excess is stored for future use.

Think of it this way. It is income in the form of carbohydrate that the tree uses in expanding production capacity and storage capacity; i.e. growing more tree so it can capture and put away more energy. And --- this is important --- considerable quantities of carbohydrate fuel are consumed in combating stress. Here, we are talking about building internal "firewalls" and fighting internal "fires" --- making all of those active internal adjustments a tree is programmed to make in response to all kinds of stress including disease-causing organisms.

Any tree spending --- or needing to spend --- more carbohydrate "money" than what it has coming in or available from storage will not survive long. The impact of carbohydrate budget is a conspicuously snowballing thing. The strongest get stronger and stronger and the weak get weaker and weaker. When carbohydrate income drops and reserves are low, careful, cautious resource management by the plantsman can be the difference between life and death.

Why do I rant about carbohydrate when your need is to refine your bonsai? It's because I think it can help you in deciding when to take bold measures and when to be patient and nurturing. My advice is to get the fuel tank full and the batteries charged before you stress your tree.

What causes stress? Stress results from not getting water when water is needed. Stress results from keeping soil so wet root cells can't get the oxygen they need. Stress results from heavy bending of the trunk and branches. Stress results from extremes of heat and cold. Stress results from fertilizer extremes --- low and high. Stress is the result of infection by disease organisms. And, stress results from insect feeding. Stress can also be caused by pruning, wiring, potting and repotting.

Then, after stressing your tree, let it rest before you stress it again. Work and recovery followed by work and recovery, again and again, is the cycle for bonsai success.

Keep in mind that --- like the kettle of water that doesn't start boiling as soon as the heat is applied --- there is a definite lag time, an inertia factor, in tree growth. So, don't be surprised if recovery of your stressed bonsai seems slow. First it will sleep, then it will creep and eventually it will leap. Better plan on at least a year for each of these development phases:

- First get your plant healthy
- Then build the framework (trunk and main branches)
- Finally, restrain and refine

Clippings:

"I am usually sorry I was too timid rather than sorry I was too severe. There is a time for waiting and sometimes it is better to prune a branch tomorrow. But if you wait too long, your specimen can be halfway to heaven and chances of shaping are gone. Also, that curve you thought so dramatic when first wired, softens as it ages."

Kay Cheever, "South Dakota Bonsai: As the Twig is Bent," *Bonsai: Journal of The American Bonsai Society*, Fall 1990.

"There are trees that have been in pots for seventy years and are still not bonsai. Trees no more transform themselves into bonsai than lumps of clay change themselves into sculptures. This is a relatively common misconception which I feel stifles the necessary creative endeavor . . . "

Harry Tomlinson, "Twenty Minute Bonsai II," *Bonsai [UK]*, No. 7, Autumn 1990.