

BCI Diplomatic Mailbag - The Ambassador's newsletter:
Communicating with BCI members around the World

2010

September
Edition



BCI- Ambassador's
Newsletter

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Editors Message

Hi to all

Spring is approaching in my part of the world but winter and the cooler weather is hanging in, when I say cool its 20C.

Les Dowdell always laughs when I talk about cool as he lives in a part of the world that gets cool at -20.

China tour is almost upon us and I hope to have heaps of photos for the next newsletter but please keep those articles coming as it is always interesting to see Bonsai in other parts of the world.

Most of this newsletter has been taken up with a fantastic article by Rob Kempinski which I promised last issue – thanks again for this Rob and I am sure all will enjoy.

Ian Glew – BCI Ambassadors Newsletter Editor: iglew@b022.aone.net.au

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BCI Convention 2010

Getting very close now and I will have photos for the December edition



BCI 2010
CHINA!
30 September - 12 October 2010

Group tour includes:
Chencun World of Flowers (Bonsai & Saiseki Exhibition, Stone Market, Bonsai Demonstration & Saiseki Lecture)
Exhibition in Yixing Pot Museum (visit Pot Factory)
Bonsai Museum in Yangzhou (Bonsai Exhibition & Bonsai Demonstration)
Stone Culture Art Center in Beijing (Viewing Stone Appreciation)
BCI Exhibition & Convention 2010 in Tianjin (Bonsai & Saiseki Exhibition)

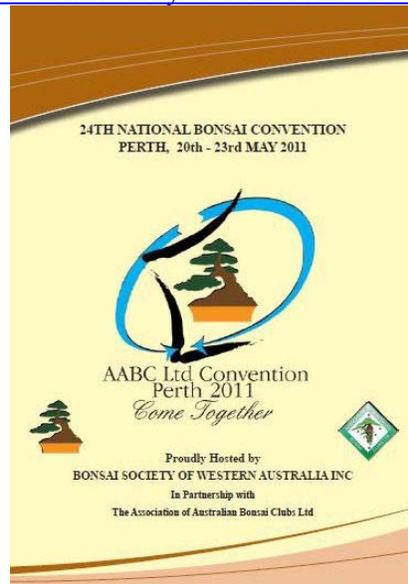
Also:
Qinhuai River Cruise (Nanjing)
Slender West Lake (Yangzhou)
The Forbidden City (Beijing)
The Great Wall (Beijing)
The Summer Palace (Beijing)

Look for details in future issues of Bonsai & Stone Appreciation Magazine and at www.bonsai-bci.com

This certainly will be a once in a life time tour and I am certainly looking forward to it

Association of Australian Bonsai Clubs Convention 2011

Next year we are off to Western Australia and for more info log on to www.bonsaisocietywa.com/convention.html



Ambassadors Membership Alert



I am sure all ambassadors have been pushing membership but what a great Christmas present membership of BCI would make to someone that is interested in Bonsai and you can't think of what to buy or an unusual raffle prize – 12 months membership.

The Willow Leaf Ficus – The Best Ficus for Shohin Bonsai by Robert Kempinski

I certainly have a number of willow leaf figs in my collection and when I recently came back from holiday one gave me a real scare as it looked like it was dead, in my part of the world they drop their leaves just prior to spring as the new leaves start to emerge and this is what had happened, certainly gave my neighbor a fright as well as they were keeping an eye on my trees. Thanks again Rob for allowing me to use this article.

Introduction

The Willow Leaf Ficus has grown into one of the most popular and perhaps best Ficus trees for creating a shohin bonsai specimen. It's a tropical tree easy to care for, versatile to style, not fussy about water or light that can thrive in either outdoor summer conditions or in indoor culture. The small leaves look good in shohin size pots and it can develop fine ramification in scale with the smaller trees. Every shohin bonsai enthusiast should have several in their collection.



Figure 1
Shohin-size formal upright Willow Leaf Ficus. It's the author's favorite bonsai.

Species Characteristics

There remains considerable discussion about the Willow Leaf Ficus' true Latin name which has changed over the last several years from *Ficus salicifolia*, (a direct translation of the common name Willow Leaf Ficus), to *Ficus neriifolia*, (*nerii* refers to the genus Oleander which has narrow leaves but is not a Ficus), to *Ficus salicaria*. In 2004 a botanist published an article declaring it as a new species and calling it the *Ficus salicaria*. *Salicaria* is latin for "Willow-like." (The citation is Berg, C.C. 2004. A new species of *Ficus* (Moraceae) of uncertain provenance. *Brittonia* 56(1): 54-57. As Berg named it the full name would be *Ficus salicaria* CC Berg.)

The origins of the Willow Leaf Ficus are a mystery. No bonsai artist has reported seeing a *Ficus salicaria* in the wild. Jim Smith, the Florida expert on this Ficus, believes it is a native of South Africa, although the South African tree has larger leaves. But doubt exists about it coming from South Africa as that area has an arid climate and the Ficus appears to prefer a more humid environment. Dr. Enrique Castano, a Mexican microbiologist and bonsai enthusiast, compared its DNA to that of the similar looking *Ficus Pertusa* in Latin America and found it did not match. It's possible that the Willow Leaf Ficus is a sport of

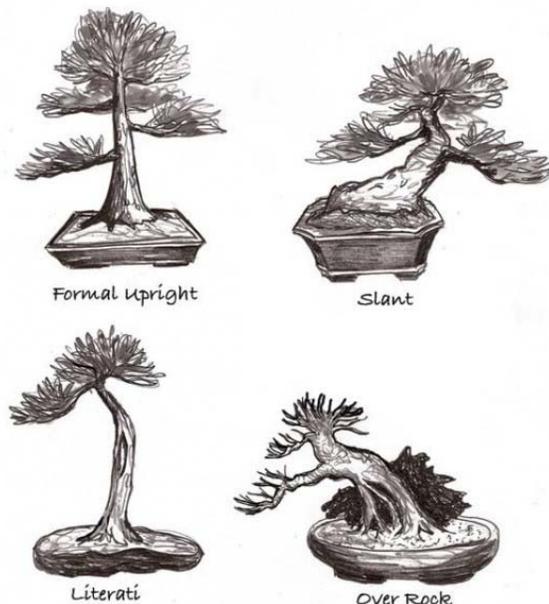
some other Ficus and may not exist in the wild. It first appeared at a South Florida orchid nursery in the 1950 or 1960s. Perhaps one of those avid orchid hunters of that period brought it back from some exotic jungle locale. Since not even Berg knows where the tree originally came from, the mystery will only be solved when some intrepid bonsai artist finds the long lost mother grove. Until then, one can only wonder.

The tree was first started as a bonsai by the late Joe Samuels, of Miami, Florida in the early 1970's. Joe found the plant at that South Florida nursery and over several years convinced the owner to sell the only sample to him. Joe developed the famous "Cloud" banyan-style bonsai from it. Since cuttings readily root soon many Florida bonsai nurseries and growers developed specimens and started selling them.

There is one common variation in the bonsai trade that is due to some unusual genetic mutation – Ficus 89. This mutation occurred at Jim Smith's nursery in Vero Beach, Florida, during a freeze in 1989. The trees appeared to die from the cold, but certain specimens eventually budded again, however the leaves on these changed and returned larger and longer. Jim called them "Ficus 89." Ficus 89 are not ideal for shohin bonsai due to the larger leaf size. While the Ficus 89 will respond to leaf reduction techniques, the smaller leaf variety responds just as well and starts from a smaller leaf, hence better for shohin.

Styles

The Willow Leaf Ficus has stylistic versatility. It can be made into virtually any style from formal upright to cascade. The only style that doesn't work is driftwood attached as the dead wood of the Ficus is not very hard nor very durable. Deadwood branches don't last long. Holes and scars can be used but expect them to rot over the years.



One style that this tree assumes very well is the shohin sumo style. A short fat trunk reminiscent of a sumo wrestler can be developed from the swollen roots or trunks of a chopped tree.



Figure 2

Sumo style shohin Willow Leaf Ficus growing in a very shallow pot that accentuates the trunk taper.

Bonsai Traits and Care

The Willow Leaf Ficus has eminently suitable traits for shohin bonsai. It makes small narrow leaves that respond well to leaf reduction techniques. It grows quickly so it can develop into a shohin style in a short time. The fast growth also means it will develop ramification in a one or two seasons giving the feel of a mature bonsai.

It thrives in shallow pots and hardly needs any roots for growth. However little root room will slow development so it's best to put only finished shohin bonsai in a very small pot. The Willow Leaf Ficus can grow in virtually any soil. In fact, it can grow without soil if given sufficient humidity and liquid fertilizer. As with all bonsai the amount and timing of water used depends on soil size, temperature and root mass. Fortunately the tree isn't fussy and can tolerate wet roots and dry roots although it will thrive if the surface of the soil dries out between watering.

Root development requires the most attention to create a good shohin bonsai. This tree, like many other Ficus will make vigorous roots, called tubers. These tubers will develop underground or at the surface and can quickly ruin the scale of a shohin bonsai.

Fortunately these tubers can be cut and carved and will create new smaller roots from the cut surfaces.

Another interesting root feature is its propensity to make aerial roots. Under very humid conditions and with a dense tropical canopy the tree will drop aerial roots which are indicative of a tropical tree and can be incorporated into a shohin bonsai design.

The tree's scar healing capability is only average. Small scars will heal but major scars don't seem to fully cover over. The exception entails a shohin made from a root cutting. For some reason the root tissue seems to form a complete callous much better than trunk tissue.

Shohin Bonsai Care

Care will vary depending on the growers' location. As a tropical tree, it can't survive any freezing weather and prefers to be hot and humid. In tropical regions they grow outdoors in full sun all year long and barely take a dormant period. For those in temperate climates, the tree can thrive in indoor culture provided its tropical environment is mimicked to a degree. That is it needs to stay warm and humid and have sufficient light. The tree will enjoy most any fertilizer types. Miracle Grow granular gives great results as the granules give a bit of nutrient to the tree with each watering. The trick is keeping the granular fertilizer on the small surface of the shohin pots. Liquid fertilizer works as well but must be given regularly as this tree is always growing. Organic fertilizer can satisfy the plants needs but might be too smelly for indoor cultivation.

Shaping follows regular bonsai techniques. The tree responds well to aluminum wiring although the wire can dig in rather quickly if the tree is growing vigorously. Smaller twigs will also respond to manual manipulation – that is bending a branch each day in the desired direction. This however is a time and labor intensive process so wiring offers a more efficient method to style the tree. The tree can also be grown with the clip and grow technique.

Regular defoliation can help develop ramification. When performing defoliation, cut the leaves just above the petiole. Some growers will pull the leaves off to save time but this is a bit crude, even if the tree will tolerate it. Pinching new growth will reduce the leaf size. The new leaves appear in a pleasing orange color that soon turns light green.

Pests and Disease

The leaves are susceptible to fungus. The leaves will turn brown and some ramification lost. If defoliated and fungicide provided quickly the damage can be contained.

Scale is the most common insect. They can be removed manually or treated with dishwasher soap or insecticidal oil. Indoors you might find white flies. Borers can be deadly as they can girdle a tree and kill all live growth above the girdle. Systemic pesticide will help prevent the borers.

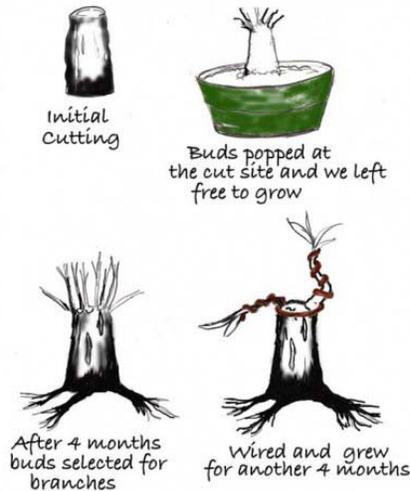
Propagation

This tree is extremely easy and fun to propagate. Cuttings root so readily that it's not unusual for Florida growers that hate to throw away clippings to have hundreds of cuttings after a major pruning session. Placing a bit of rooting hormone and keeping the cutting moist but not submerged will grow a new tree. Root cuttings also will sprout buds and make trees. These cuttings having grown in the confines of a container can have very interesting shapes very suitable for shohin bonsai. The trees also air layer very readily, in fact the aerial roots can actually support the growth of a new tree.

The Willow Leaf Ficus sometimes makes a small fig. To date no American growers have noticed viable seeds from these figs due to the fig's symbiosis with a specialized insect. Most ficus require a wasp to fertilize the flowers which lie in the interior of the fig. The female wasp enters a small stoma in the bottom of the fig to lay eggs and in turn distributes the pollen to the seeds. Perhaps the wasp species unique to the Willow Leaf Fig doesn't live in North America.

Case Studies

Here are a few case studies to illustrate the development of a shohin Willow Leaf Ficus. The first is a shohin bonsai called "Rigatoni". In 1999 this bonsai started from a simple tubular cutting akin to a piece of rigatoni pasta. The cutting was about 1.75 inches tall and about 3/4 inch diameter in 1999.



After it sprouted numerous buds, a leader was selected to make an informal upright tree. Usually when developing a Ficus, branches are pruned very short and re-grown to develop taper. This approach is a bit different than working with a juniper or pine. A Ficus can be grown into a design instead of wired to heavily contort the branches to move the foliage pads in close.

It has since developed into a shohin bonsai – about 5 inches tall.

Here it is with and without leaves. When developing the pads, prune them as triangles when looking from the side and from the top. With shohin size trees, the pads will merge into one another as there isn't room to "let the birds fly through." The surface roots to the right formed as a result of a tuber that was allowed to grow and then cut and carved. It gives the tree a sense of maturity. The pot is a hand signed Japanese pot I picked up in Japan.



Figure 3
The Rigatoni Ficus in leaf. Hard to believe it was a cylindrical shoot 8 years prior to this photograph.



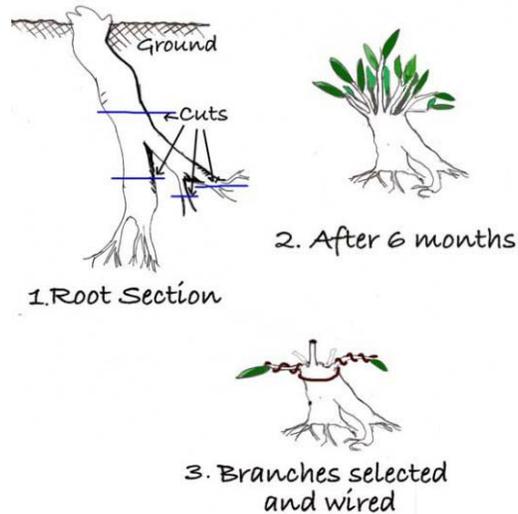
Figure 4
Same tree 15 minutes later after defoliation. Defoliation helps develop ramification and will create smaller leaves temporarily



Figure 5
Tree in 2008, Nine years after being a tubular cutting, The blue pot is a hand carved pot by the author replacing the prior pot which broke after falling off the bench.

Root Cutting Example

This shohin Ficus bonsai started as a root cutting in 2004. An interesting portion of Willow Leaf Ficus root was trimmed at both ends and left free to grow for a year.



Regular pruning kept the non leader branches short and thin- a critical step in shohin Willow Leaf Ficus development. Also note the granular fertilizer on the soil. The slanting shape on the right of the tree came from the clever use of a root to add trunk mass. Aerial roots can also provide this function.



Figure 6

Development of branches after about 1 year. Note branch selection and the development of the tuber root on the right. The scar where the main leader was re-chopped to change direction and add taper and to keep the tree small is still visible.



Figure 7

After two years of pruning and defoliation it has developed stout taper and wonderful ramification. Note how well the scars have healed on this root cutting. The pot is hand made by the author

Gallery

Here are some other shohin Willow Leaf Ficus trees to enjoy.



Figure 8

This little tree has quite a history. It was originally started by Jim Smith. At one point Suthin Sukosolvisit rewired the tree. Five years ago it was restyled by the author by raising the trunk, growing new roots and selecting a new front. Now it has the look of an ancient Ficus in an 8 inch tall tree. The pot is by Sarah Rayner. Note the orange color on some of the new leaves.



Figure 9

This trunk of this slant style might be a bit thick for a shohin, but the tree is only 9 inches tall. It was air layered off a larger Ficus and has had major work including the wedge technique to lower the number 1 branch. The pot is the BCI World Convention Commemorative pot by Certe of Italy.



Figure 10

When this tree started several years ago it had very poor rootage. Using sphagnum moss and rooting hormone, ground layering improved the surface roots in only a couple of years. The tree tops barely reaches 10 inches. The pot is a Bonsai Society of Florida 2002 Convention Commemorative pot by Horse Creek Pottery.



Closing and next Issue

I have just returned from a trip around Scandinavia and Russia although this photo has nothing to do with Bonsai it is a shot of a Fiord just outside Balerstand – we are high up and that boat on the Fiord is large enough to take a number of large buses that holds 40 people each.



This type of scenery was around every bend

Have Bonsai fun – next issue will be Christmas!

