

# DRIFTWOOD STYLE BONSAI

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## Chapter 14

### NOTES

#### I. OBJECTIVES

As a result of studying this section of the *Intermediate Bonsai Syllabus* and viewing audio visual presentations, or participating in other activities provided by an instructor, you will be able to:

1. Define the meaning of the term *driftwood* style bonsai and the terms “Jin”, “Shari” and “Uro”.
2. Using an appropriate stock plant, demonstrate the carving of a shari and or jin.
3. Using an appropriate stock plant, demonstrate the carving of an uro.

*Note: A great deal of the material contained in this chapter was acquired while attending residential courses with British bonsai artist Dan Barton at his home in Bristol, UK. The course included the visiting of many examples of ancient trees and studying the elements which give them that appearance.*

#### II. GENERAL

##### A. Definitions:

1. *Jin* is the Japanese term for a dead tip on a branch or trunk. Most usually the term refers to the terminal end.
2. *Shari* is the Japanese term used when bark is peeled from a branch or trunk to give the appearance of a mature tree that suffered a stress situation that killed that portion.

3. *Uro* is the Japanese term used to describe hollows in the trunk, often seen in ancient trees.
- B. Bonsai which are classified in one of the other styles may, of course, possess dead wood such as a jinned apex, a dead and driftwood styled branch or two, etc. Most of the concepts discussed in this chapter apply to any dead wood on bonsai.
- C. Dead wood on a tree may be caused by a variety of factors: extreme cold, wind, ice or sand storm, drought, a branch broken by weight of snow, avalanche or another falling tree, fungal infestation, insect attack, lightning strike, lack of light, or just old age.

### III. DRIFTWOOD STYLE BONSAI DEFINED

- A. The *driftwood* style is derived from the character and nature of the trunk of the tree rather than from any structural form.
- B. The essence of a driftwood style tree relies on conveying a sense of time, strife and in the ultimate form of a hollow-trunk style, antiquity.
  1. The viewer's mind has been conditioned to associate bleached timber as being old and weather worn. Therefore bleached and jagged dead wood on a tree is seen as a sign of age.
  2. A sense of struggle and clinging onto life must be conveyed in the design. Therefore it is necessary to consider the design of the remainder of the tree to harmonize with the concept of struggle and age. There is a lesser amount of live foliage and the branches should be short.



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**IV. SELECTING MATERIAL FOR DRIFTWOOD STYLE BONSAI**

- A. There may be several reasons for selecting a specimen to be carved to create a *driftwood* bonsai or one with dead wood.
1. The material may be unsuitable for any other style because of faults within the tree such as faulty branches, ugly trunk, lack of good taper, poor bark quality, massive pruning cut such as removal of the top of the tree, etc.
  2. By carving jin, shari or a uro, one or more of the faults may be corrected or masked.
  3. The carving for the sake of carving on an otherwise quite acceptable specimen is not a valid reason. If you want to carve for the sake of carving, practice on some dead material.
- B. Because the ultimate desired effect is one of strife and age, the more mature the material the better to give credence to the illusion.
- C. The appearance of having undergone great strife and of being quite old may be enhanced by:
1. Choosing material with mature bark.
  2. Creating a scenario as to why the dead wood occurred and incorporating those other areas into the area of dead wood. As an example. If an uro (dead wood along the trunk) is to be created, also create one or more dead branches (shari) whose lines of dead wood join the uro creating a reasonable scenario for what happened.

### V. CREATING DRIFTWOOD STYLE BONSAI AND DEAD WOOD ON BONSAI

#### A. Before beginning to carve:

1. Select only trees in very good health and ones which are stable within their growing containers. The carving process is a traumatic event in the life of the tree; it needs all of its resources to survive.
2. Make sure you are carving to enhance the appearance of the tree, not carving for the sake of carving.
3. Gather the necessary tools. Make certain that they are sharp and in good repair.
4. If power tools are to be used, have and wear protective eye and facial masks and suitable gloves. Tie long hair back or put it under a cap. Remove or secure long sleeves. If the soil is to be covered, use aluminum foil rather than cloth. If the power tool becomes entangled with the covering it will simply rip the foil but would catch and hold cloth. Variable speed tools are best to give control over the speed of the cutting attachment. Insure that bits are securely anchored in the tool's chuck. Do not use a bit at a speed higher than recommended.
5. Mark the area to be carved using a felt tip marker or chalk. In marking, follow the natural lines of the tree. Remember that you are telling a story of what happened to the tree over a period of time.

#### B. Creating Jin and Shari

1. Cut the bark and cambium at the base of the dead wood at the place where the dead wood will join live wood. This will prevent accidental damage to the live wood.
2. Decide on the length the dead wood is to be and add a

bit more.

*Note: If the wood to be styled is live, has internal moisture, and its position is to be altered by application of heat as described in a later section, do NONE of the following until heat has been applied and it is in the position you want.*

3. Break the branch downward and rip along the underside of the branch or the front side of a jinned apex. Be careful to not remove bark, cambium and wood below the area to be made into dead wood.
4. Further sharpen and make more rugged the end of the branch by using a branch splitter or concave cutter to split and rip the branch.



Illus 14-2

N.H.

5. Create a textured and fissured appearance to create areas of dark and light. Using a small blow torch burn off the remaining hairs and soft wood areas. Brush with a wire brush. Finish with a light sanding using fine sand paper. When completed there should be no evidence of tool marks.

6. If there is to be a uro adjacent to the dead wood branch, join the branch's stripped area with the uro, unifying the dead wood area.
7. Bleach with a lime sulphur solution to preserve and to visually enhance the area. The whiteness of the bleached wood can be moderated by adding a drop or two of india ink in a small amount of lime sulphur before applying.
8. To alter the jin or deadwood's position, either wire it into position or use heat to bend it into position. Following is a technique of applying heat taught by bonsai artist Dan Barton in the UK:
  - a. If the area to be repositioned is live, do not shorten the branch yet and do not remove the bark.
  - b. If the wood is dead and stiff, wrap the area to be effected by the bend with kitchen paper towel or bathroom paper and thoroughly wet the paper with water. Wrap the wet paper with aluminum kitchen foil and leave it to soak into the wood for 30 to 60 minutes.
  - c. If the wood is alive, has internal moisture, and retains its bark, wrapping with paper and aluminum foil is not necessary.
  - d. Use a small blowtorch to heat the entire portion of the wood which is to be bent. Be careful to not burn yourself or to damage living portions of the tree.
  - e. With your free hand apply constant gentle pressure in the direction in which you want the wood to bend. When the water in the paper or the moisture in the live wood begins to boil, it will create steam which softens the wood.
  - f. Eventually you will feel the wood yield to the pressure. Continue until the it is in the position

you want and stop heating.

- g. Continue holding it in position and carefully remove any aluminum foil and paper.
- h. Dry the wood with the blowtorch and shut off the blowtorch. Then blow on the wood until it is cool, otherwise it may not retain its new position when it gets wet.
- i. If the treated wood was live and you left the bark on, remove the bark and shorten as appropriate and carve as described earlier.
- j. If the wood has been scorched in the process of bending, the use of a wire brush and lime sulphur will lighten it. Some scorching and darkening in deeper areas in the carving are desirable, giving the appearance of depth.

### C. Creating an Uro

1. After having outlined the area to be removed, cut along both edges using a knife or a small circular power saw. This roughs out the area and establishes the limits of the cutting. The edges should be undercut to give the appearance that the removed area is deeper than it is and to retard overgrowth by cambium attempting to repair the damage.
2. Using hand chisels or power tools, hollow out a major portion of the outlined area. Do not merely strip the wood leaving a cylindrical form. Rather create a textured and fissured appearance to create areas of dark and light. There should be within the concave hollow areas which are raised and areas which are more deeply depressed to create additional visual interest. Insure that the lines complement those of the trunk and branches.

3. Occasionally step back from the work and view the project as a whole.
4. All of the carving does not have to be done in one session.
5. Using a small blow torch burn off the remaining hairs and soft wood areas. Create dark places deep within the carved areas. Brush with a wire brush and finish with a light sanding using fine sand paper. When completed there should be no evidence of tool marks.
6. It is often appropriate to have one or more dead branches forming a part of the dead wood area.
7. Bleach with a lime sulphur solution as described earlier for jin and shari.

### VI. SUMMARY

- A. A *driftwood* style bonsai is one on which the major feature is the presence of dead wood which gives the effect of driftwood.
- B. Bonsai of various styles may have dead wood features which do not necessarily dictate that the style be called *driftwood*.
- C. The presence of dead wood on a tree indicates that the tree has experienced stress and may be of an advanced age.
- D. The decision to apply dead wood effects on a tree should be made with the intention of enhancing the tree's appearance rather than to simply create an effect.
- E. Various techniques may be used to create the dead wood effect. They should be applied with due respect for the health of the tree and the safety of the bonsai artist