

Dandelions and Bonsai

By Andrew Smith

The problem could be that I'm a closet perfectionist, though I'm not ready to admit it and no one has ever suggested it. In fact, most people would say I've taken the whole wabi/sabi thing too far and used it to justify a derelict and unkempt lifestyle that will surely lead to ruin someday, if it's not already a sign of ruin upon me now.

I couldn't agree more, except I have this one troubling symptom that points the other direction and pops up every time I get ready to display a bonsai tree. I recently displayed a tree at the Chicago Botanic Gardens and then another tree at the National Bonsai Exhibition in Rochester, NY, and it happened both times.

The National Bonsai Exhibition is organized by Bill Valavanis and a whole crew of very dedicated bonsai people. This year's show was an absolutely awesome gathering of trees, stones and people from around the country and the world. It was a privilege for me to be able to participate in it. Some of the trees there were so beautiful and vibrant that I cringed a little to put mine up there beside them. But the comparison makes me see that my trees can continue to get better and more beautiful for many years to come. And that's a happy thought. It's like coming to the end of a beautiful path in the woods and then finding it isn't really the end, just a sharp turn, and the path continues on and on.

The troubling symptoms I have are depression, irritability and extreme fussiness every time I scratch one of my fine bonsai display stands. And I don't think I've ever used one of my fine bonsai display stands without leaving a scratch, or sometimes even a gouge, upon it.

I lay the blame for this on the presupposition that it makes no sense at all to set a 60 lb tree in a rough stoneware pot, that has to be watered daily no less, on top of a finely finished and polished wooden table that likely cost several hundred dollars and isn't big enough to properly serve a TV dinner on. And then, the tree and pot must be wiggled and turned and slid back and forth across the stand until their position is just so, even though every second person who comes by will think it would look better if it were just an inch further to the left, or right.

The end result of all this is that every stand I own has scratches all across the shiny, smooth top. I try to look at them like laugh lines on a dear face, but honestly, they often make me frown. I've tried various strategies to avoid them, like putting felt under the pot, but I haven't had great luck. This

last time I bought stick-on cork feet to put on the bottom of the pot. It took me 20 years to figure that out but it only sort-of worked. Although the cork did not technically leave any scratches in the stand it still marred the surface. And next time I use it I'll be able to see where I put the pot last time.

Anyway, it makes me wonder why bonsai stands, at least bonsai stands for closet perfectionists like me, aren't made pre-scratched, or with a rough top so scratches won't show?

I could avoid the whole problem by not entering that picky, picky, picky world of bonsai display, which maybe goes completely against the grain of my personality, but I've come to see that in a good display a bonsai really rises into the realm of art in a way it never will just sitting on a growing bench. So I think that rather than avoiding it I'm going to build an outdoor tokanoma and start displaying trees every day. It will have to be an outdoor tokanoma because my wife won't let me remodel the hall closet into one. I already asked.

When the show was finished I went to Cleveland, Ohio, to visit the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. There's a lot of guitars in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but what I first noticed was the landscaping. There were about a dozen enormous cement planters in front of the pavilion, each of which had an off-colored plastic shrub stuck in it. After seeing all the beautiful trees at the National Exhibition, and knowing the years of love and labor that went into creating them, plastic shrubbery was a bit of a let down; an unconscious parody of civilization without its feet on the ground.

But there were other things to see there, like Michael Jackson's famed glove, or James Brown's jumpsuit, that had "SEX" written across the front in sequins, just in case you hadn't picked up on that. And a lot of guitars, as I already mentioned.

From there I went south and visited Nelson-Kennedy Ledges State Park. This is a small Ohio State Park that I last visited when I was 5 or 6 years old. At the time my mother kept a tight grip on my hand and wouldn't let me near any of the ledges, much to my dismay. This has bothered me for nearly 50 years and I have always wanted to go back.

I finally did. The Great Pyramids are not on my bucket list, but Nelson Ledges is right at the top. And it's really a wonderful, beautiful park, well worth visiting, with huge stone ledges, waterfalls and rock crevices to hike through and explore. And I could also see why my mother hung onto me so tightly, because there were many spots where you could slip and end up in the paper the next day. But thank heaven's there are almost no guardrails.

So for the next week I meandered towards home, stopping to see my parents and then visit some bonsai friends in Chicago on the way back. When I got home I was remembering the first bonsai exhibit I had seen, at the Denver Botanic Gardens 20 years before.

There were three trees in that show that I could still bring clearly to mind. One was a group of quaking aspen with tiny, dime-sized leaves. Another was a large Rocky Mountain juniper with a twisting, spiraling trunk. And the third was a dandelion, with a short, fat trunk.

I knew nothing about bonsai at the time and I naively accepted the premise that by using its magic arts you could transform any plant into a bonsai. But as time went on I began to wonder about that dandelion, and how it was created, or if it even really was a dandelion. Perhaps I had misunderstood something. And in 20 years I never saw or heard of another.

But the day I got home I walked down to check the greenhouses and I found another bonsai dandelion growing right there. It had a trunk the diameter of my little finger that was hard and dark and covered with what could pass for bark. It even had nebari at the base. It was a most unusual dandelion, so I dug it up and put it in a pot. And I began to consider how it was created.

What I saw was that it was growing on a slope and the soil was eroding away from it. So the “trunk” of the dandelion is actually the exposed taproot. This taproot is much more solid than the hollow aboveground stem, and it does have a barklike surface. Whether I can keep it alive and use it as a bonsai I don’t know; perhaps the only sure way to kill a dandelion would be to try and deliberately cultivate it as a bonsai.

Anyway, the path goes on.