

The Bigger is Better theory of Bonsai

By Andrew Smith

Having a theory about the way things are is the surest way I know to be wrong; at least that's my theory. The world doesn't care how we think it should be: It's just its own perfect and ugly self, whether we like it or not.

My first theories about bonsai involved some very arbitrary size restrictions: In my mind bonsai were small, so when I went out looking for them I only saw trees of a certain size. My theory of a bonsai tree was something with a fat, curvy trunk, between 10-24 inches tall. That was the tree I searched for. And anything else was invisible.

As time went on I learned new things that opened my eyes a bit. For one, I learned that you could put curves into a trunk that didn't already have them. For another, I learned that bonsai could be more than just short, fat trees. Some were tall and graceful. Some cascaded over the side of the pot. Some had more than one trunk. Some were whole forests. My theory of bonsai had to expand. Now when I went out looking for trees I saw more of them, trees that had been invisible to me before.

And finally I realized that bonsai didn't have to limit itself to a certain size. I saw some perfect tiny bonsai at a show that weren't even two inches tall. I thought they were fakes, but they were not. They were astounding. I saw others that were massive and nearly as tall as I am. They were astounding too. They made me realize that bonsai is more an art of proportion than of size. And that made me realize that there were really no limits to what could be used as a bonsai. The only limits were the ones the bonsai artists put on themselves.

I still clearly remember the first large tree I collected for bonsai. It was an old juniper with a trunk 7 or 8 inches in diameter and a height of maybe 30 inches. I was so impressed by that tree! I had seen a lot of trees of this size but had never tried to collect one because they didn't fit my theory of bonsai—they were too big to even consider. But after I collected this old juniper I revised my theory of how big a bonsai could be.

And that's where I went wrong, I think. Bigger is better with hammers and paychecks, but bonsai is an art of proportion, not of size.

But that old juniper had character, a real, ancient, mountain character; and it had a presence that just grabbed your attention. I was awestruck by it. I immediately changed my scale and began searching for and collecting larger and larger trees for bonsai. My partner and I outdid each other in finding enormous old stunted trees we couldn't possibly lift on inaccessible mountain ledges and then figuring out how to lift them and carry them out of there. It was exciting and exhilarating, and extremely difficult, and probably downright foolish. But we did it.

Now, years later, I try and force myself to leave those giants of the mountain right where I found them rather than bringing them home. It's not that they won't make a beautiful and impressive bonsai—they certainly will. And, because of their more developed root systems, larger trees usually have a very high transplant survival rate. And they have a presence that does not require subtlety to grasp.

But bonsai is an art of proportion, and one of the ingredients in that mix is human. I want to be able to move and manage my bonsai by myself as much as possible, and really big bonsai are just out of my scale. I don't have a forklift to move them. And I don't have the time to sift and mix a bathtub full of soil for just one tree. So I make myself stick to trees that are in proportion to me, so I can take care of them properly. My theory is that a bonsai should be something I can lift.

Except, except, except...well, occasionally my theories don't keep up with reality. I do have some really huge trees in pots, though I can't remember how or why they got there. But since they got there somehow, I might as well enjoy them.

I recently started shaping a big old ponderosa pine that I carried out of the woods a couple years ago. I had gone out looking for very small specimens when I stumbled across this one. It was probably 12 feet tall, but the base of the trunk was intriguing and it had several low branches. It did not appear to have a good root system for transplanting though, so I left it alone.

But, for whatever reason, I couldn't quit thinking about it. And it was in an area that was marked for logging, so I knew it would not be there too much

longer. I decided it wasn't really a foolishly large bonsai; it was a tree rescue mission.

So I stuck a tag on the tree, lopped the top, and carried it out of there. When I got home I built a box big enough to fish from and spent the rest of the day mixing soil and potting it. Surprisingly enough, it seemed to like it's new home and started to grow. And there it has sat, huge and awkward as a wart, ever since. There is no chance I'll ever be able to move it.

I had hoped to repot it this spring. And I do actually have a couple bonsai pots big enough to hold it, but the season got ahead of me. So I started shaping it instead, bending branches the diameter my wrist to bring the foliage in closer to the trunk.

And suddenly, it's starting to look like a bonsai, a really big bonsai! I can't wait till next year when I can put it in the pot I have for it, the one that weighs 96 pounds when it's bone dry and empty. Then it will really be a humongous bonsai tree and I'll need a team of Clydesdales to move it. And I always wanted some Clydesdales. So I'm excited about it.

Now I just need to tweak my theory of bonsai a little bit to fit the tree.