

This past January we had two great sessions with two bonsai masters, Ted Matson and Phil Tackhill. Jim McEown encouraged me to share my notes from both demos with club members. I hope they are helpful.
Tom Gatz

Bonsai tips from Ted Matson

Jan. 17, 2012 Phoenix Bonsai Society demo

-When you get new material, study it but delay working on it until the 'vision' from your gut on how to style it finally hits you. When that happens, drop everything and go to town on it

-Big moments in the life of your tree are when you first collect or buy it, when you first style it, when you re-style it, and when you correct damage

-The biggest challenge of bonsai is learning the specific needs of the different species of trees and how to 'read them'. For example, on elm trees the brown buds lighten in color and lift up when they are ready to leaf out

-To determine if elm branches are alive or dead, spray them with water; living stems will turn a greenish color. Dead will be brown or purple

-Select material that will bud back readily to give you more options and opportunities in designing your trees

-The four most important things to strive for when selecting and developing your tree are:

1) Movement (unless it is a formal upright style, avoid straight trunks and branches)

2) Taper (the trunk gets narrower from bottom to top and the branches get more narrow as they extend outward)

3) Compression (branch segments get shorter as they extend outward)

and trunk segments get shorter as they curve upward)

4) Ramification (constantly pinch branches back to encourage more branching)

-Eliminate coarseness and clunkiness in your branches. It's not about the quantity of twigs, but more about their refinement

-Thin tips to avoid knob development. Rub buds off before new growth emerges

When you first cut off a portion of a branch to promote ramification, leave the thick stub in place until the new branch thickens up; then you can shape the stub to the proper taper to match the width of the new branch

-Roots should extend out and slightly forward to 'embrace' the viewer

-Keep the roots buried to thicken them; you can expose just the tops of the roots when showing the tree, then bury them again

-Hide your work

-Clean out stubs to allow them to callous over

-Knob cutters are better than concave cutters because they are less likely to cause splitting

-Shrubs are basally (bottom) dominant; trees are apically (top) dominant

-Broadleaf trees in nature don't normally have a lot of deadwood or bleached wood unless they are from a higher elevation.

-You can steam deadwood to move and shape it. Wrap it in foil, steam for 20-30 minutes. Use a torch to dry it out after you shape it.

-Get in the habit of holding your shears flat (horizontally) to focus on removing the upright growth on your trees and promoting the lateral

growth.

-Watch visitors, especially children, when they first enter a bonsai show. Notice which trees/styles to which they are immediately drawn. This will guide you when selecting and designing your own trees.

Bonsai tips from Phil Tacktil

Jan. 21, 2012 workshop at Ken and Carol Roberts

-To make the trunk appear thicker, shorten the tree's height and width

-Try to design your tree with no 'front' so that it looks good from all sides

-Phil likes coir (coconut fiber) in his potting mix (washes it first to get salt out)

-He recommends submerging mame trees (in tiny bonsai pots) in trays of sand when not showing them to facilitate watering and health

-Indoors (15% humidity) is TOO DRY for most bonsai (compared to 30% humidity in the Sahara)

-He swears by 'SuperThrive' (3 drops to the gallon) even though he said that the UC Davis researchers apparently found no benefit

-He uses a magnet in his water line to get junk out of the water and minimize calcium buildup

-He periodically cuts and removes alternating 'pie-slice' portions of soil out of his pots to discourage circling roots and replaces it with fresh potting mix

-Pomegranates are short-lived

-Weeping style is high maintenance

-A 'perfect' tree is not exciting. We like what nature contorts and twists.

-He recommends limited use of concave cutters once the tree is designed. After the initial cutting he mostly uses scissors. Otherwise he says you are constantly redesigning your tree.

-Save larger branches that you remove and use them for create the temporary impression of nebari (strong, exposed roots) until the real thing develops. Use moss or top dressing to blend them to the trunk. He says its not cheating since bonsai is an art.

-He seals his cuts with Elmer's glue

-Cut off tap roots

-Sometimes it is helpful to temporarily leave a stub when you remove a branch so you can attach wire to it when pulling in another branch or straightening up the apex

-Let bougainvilleas go dry, then water them, to promote flowering

-It's good to transplant right after pruning to take the 'workload' off of the roots