The Buffalo Bonsai Society

Phoenix Graft

The technique of attaching young live plants to weathered wood is arguably the most controversial of all bonsai techniques. The Japanese call the practice tanuki, implying deception or cheat. As you can imagine, this is frowned upon in Japanese bonsai. American bonsai artist Dan Robinson coined the memorable phrase “Phoenix Graft”, which views the process from an entirely different perspective. It is based on a legend about a bird that flew into the sun, died and was reborn. The terms tanuki and phoenix graft clearly illustrate the difference in attitude that can and does exist, not only between east and west, but also between individual artists. If you set out to make a tanuki, a deception, you will have no respect for your work. But if you set out to create a phoenix graft, the implication is that you are embarking on a more noble quest. What could possibility be wrong with combining a magnificent piece of driftwood, nature’s art, with a healthy young plant, to create an object of great dignity and beauty. If you do it, do it well and above all, don’t lie about it. It’s only a deception if it is your intention to deceive. In England this technique is called ‘wraparound’.

To create a phoenix graft select a piece of driftwood that looks like a portion of a dead tree. Perhaps the trunk and branches of a nice bonsai that died and still has it’s good features can be utilized. Cut the base so that it stands in the right attitude when in the pot. Drill holes through the base to use in fastening the tree in the pot. If the driftwood you have chosen is small in diameter, it may be necessary to attach a piece of wood to the bottom for stability.

The plant material you select should have a trunk caliper and a general shape that matches the curves in the driftwood and has possibilities for side, back and apex branching. You may use one, two or three plants depending on the size and shape of your driftwood. The most popular plants used in phoenix grafts are junipers. With Shimpaku leading the list. When selecting your material, keep in mind that the plant must have some flexibility so that it conforms to the driftwood. Too heavy a trunk would make it difficult in this respect.

Determine where you are going to attach the live material. Using a marker, indicate this on the driftwood. Do the same with the other plants that you are attaching. At this point, remove all branches and foliage on the side of the plants that will be attached to driftwood. Next, secure the driftwood, put on your safety glasses and using an electric grinder, begin to carve the groove for the trunk of the plant, following the curve of the driftwood. You make one groove at a time and the groove should be one half the depth of the caliper of the plant. The plant should fit snugly but be careful when placing it into the groove. Do not scar the cambium.

When you have the driftwood ready to accept the plants coat it with a wood preservative, (Min Wax wood hardener), and to give it that deadwood look , use lime sulfur. You will need a couple coats of each. Let each coat dry before recoating. This is done before attaching the plants as it would be difficult to do afterwards. Gently fit the plant into the groove. It may be necessary to remove some of the root ball to get the plant up close to the driftwood. Fasten the plant into the groove using brass nails or screws.

Continued on Pg. 2

Phoenix Graft, *Cont. from Pg. 1*

Steel, even stainless or coated steel, kills plants if allowed to contact the cambium. Drive the fastener into the wood being careful not to damage the cambium or split the wood. It is advisable to drill holes where the fasteners are to be placed. The fasteners should be placed in strategic points where the trunk needs to be bent. If you use nails they should be driven at angles to the trunk and two should be place close together so they cross. Screws may be driven straight in. If nails are driven straight in, when the tree grows it could pull them out of the driftwood. Hence the cross-nailing.

When you have attached all the plants, pot the tree using normal potting techniques. Thread wires through the predrilled holes in the base and fasten the whole arrangement securely into the pot. Work the soil in around the driftwood and the root system(s), using a chopstick. Soak the whole pot in a solution of water and superthrive and let drain. Place in a warm sheltered spot out of wind and rain. Do not attempt to style the tree at this time wait until the roots get established, about four to six weeks. Then trim, wire and style the composition .All attached plants and the driftwood are treated as one bonsai.

Phoenix grafts can be made using other species and Japanese maples make a great bonsai this way.

A collected piece of driftwood and some low cost seedling whips can, with a little effort, put an attractive bonsai on your bench.