

Notes from the Arnold Arboretum

Japanese Theory — American Practice

Mrs. Constance E. Derderian is Honorary Curator of Bonsai at the Arnold Arboretum, is a director of the American Bonsai Society, and has worked with bonsai for many years. She has studied at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden with Frank Okamura, Kan Yashiroda, Lynn Perry, and others. In 1967 her studies took her to Japan where she had the opportunity to study with Kyuzo Murata. Mrs. Derderian is a leading authority on Bonsai in the northeastern part of the United States, and is well known throughout the country. She writes, lectures, and teaches classes in bonsai.

In 1969 Mrs. Derderian was asked by the Arnold Arboretum to direct and carry out a program of pruning and re-potting the Larz Anderson collection of bonsai. Mrs. Derderian describes below one of the incidents which took place during the delicate operations. *Ed.*

For many years I have been interested in the bonsai of the Arnold Arboretum. Now I had been asked to do the job of pruning and re-potting the collection. I was apprehensive, but I wanted above all to help the Arboretum care for its bonsai. Fortunately Robert Hebb, Assistant Horticulturist, and Henry Goodell, Head Pruner and Assistant Superintendent, were assigned to help me. We worked in the greenhouse by the desk of Alfred Fordham, Propagator, so the bonsai were not abandoned to a total stranger.

The first of the five large *Chamaecyparis* presented a problem immediately. The tree is about three and one-half feet tall and the root ball, out of the container, measured about twenty inches in width and twelve to fourteen inches in depth. The trunk had split vertically at the base, severing the lowest branch on the right. The split began above the branch and extended down to the soil. When the tree was moved the branch wobbled badly. Bob and Hank both said it would have to be cut off! I couldn't bear it. The branch had such interesting form and was definitely alive and in good health. We called Al over and I explained the theory of cutting pie-shaped wedges from the soil ball of old bonsai in order to renew the roots. I suggested that



we cut a wedge but begin the cuts at either side of the split at the base of the trunk. Then there would be a possibility of taking the roots which were feeding that branch. The result would be a 175 year old bonsai in half an hour.

The problem was that although I knew the theory well I had never had an opportunity to practice it. This was a larger wedge than was recommended. If it were too large we risked killing the large tree. If too small a wedge were taken, or there were not enough root structure, the branch would be lost. After a discussion the unanimous decision was to test the theory. I marked the wedge and began to cut, but the huge root ball was too much for me. Bob took over and neatly and carefully, with a very thin root-saw, cut the wedge away from the root ball. We had cut away as small a wedge as we dared but after it was cut it looked huge! Two years before while in Japan I had bought a very handsome old bonsai container, not because I had a use for it, but because it was beautiful. It was perfect for the new tree. In my excitement I knocked it off the table and it shattered. We had to use a shorter container which was too

heavy for the graceful lines of the branch, and too narrow to allow proper placement, but it was all we had.

We potted up the “tree” and Hank went to work skillfully smoothing up the ragged edges of the split and carving out the soft spots. There was only a narrow strip of living tissue connecting branch and root so it was important to leave as much support as possible. The part of the main trunk which was still attached was cleaned and allowed to whiten like the broken parts of trees in nature. Hank also made a crutch from pruned materials to use Japanese style to support the extending part of the branch.

We had done all we could at that time. We offered the misfortune of the broken container to the evil gods, and put the new-old bonsai into the care of the greenhouse staff.

Two years later the larger tree is thriving. The smaller tree is beginning to fill out and makes one of the most interesting trees in the collection. The theory which I had learned in Japan, plus American knowledge of growing plants, had worked together to save both the old tree and its branch.

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Correction

The caption for the picture of *Syringa chinensis* which appears on page 117 of the May issue of *Arnoldia* should read “*Syringa chinensis* at Highland Park, Rochester, New York.”