

Drift Wood in Bonsai

Sabamiki, Shari, and Jin

Sabamiki, Sharimiki, or Driftwood style is a very popular style in bonsai. Dead wood shows age. It is also used to portray stories of past events that happened to your bonsai. Shari is a large dead part of your bonsai while jin is a dead part of a branch. Driftwood gives a special character to your bonsai. It also gives dramatic effects that make audiences pause in awe. Creating a bonsai with shari and jin is not a simple matter, the composition must be consistent and in tune with nature.

Jins and Sharis

Jins and Sharis should be as natural as possible. Do not force the shari into the design of your bonsai. I have seen a lot of bonsai where you could see a white smooth pointed jin jutting out the top of the foliage. If you take a short fast glance you could mistake it for a white rhino horn place on top of the bonsai. You stop and think why? What is it? In this case it is better to remove the jin to better the bonsai. I have seen jins which are very nicely cut around a branch and the tip sharpened like a pencil. It looks like an ivory tusk with a nice collar; this destroys the natural look of the bonsai. Look around you, see how natural jins look like, this is how you should make it. I have seen bonsai where there are so many jins poking all around the trunk and branches. This is confusing and destroys the orderly placement your branches. Do not do a jin on all the dead parts that you see on a tree. It should somehow follow the rules of branch placement to help in the overall design. You could put a jin on a part where there should be a branch, or a jin to replace a missing apex. Do not collar the jin. Make the transition from the live part to the dead part as gradual and uneven as in nature. Avoid using too many jins not unless you are creating the shabamiki style. Make the jin taper imperfectly not like a sharpened pointed horn. The tip should be narrow but not a single point. It should look like it was split apart until it became narrower but never look as it was sharpened.

Sabamiki

Sabamaki or the drift wood style in bonsai differs in all other bonsai styles because the design of the bonsai is built around the dead part of the tree. Sometimes the dead wood is much larger than the live part and produces a kind of awe. It is often about a story on how the tree is struggling to survive. The location of the live part of the sabamiki should be somewhere in the middle to the top of the tree. The live part should not be coming from the base or the roots otherwise; the dead part would not look like it is a part of the tree. But rather it would look like an ornamental dead wood place beside a plant.

Phoenix Graft

If the live part of the sabamiki is coming from the base or the roots you can cheat a little bit by

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doing a phoenix graft. This is done by using a router to create a channel from the base where the live part is, to somewhere close to the top. The trunk is then inserted into the channel. In time the trunk would grow and the channel will no longer be noticeable. The phoenix graft is a powerful technique to improve your bonsai. Sometimes, dead bonsai material with good form could still be used by phoenix graft. Keep in my mind that a real tree is also dead except for a thin layer of life (xylem, cambium, and phloem) surrounding it. In essence a real tree is much like a phoenix graft.

Hunted material coming from the tropics has a lot of dead wood due to slash and burn agriculture. Slash and burn is the process wherein a forest is cleared by chopping all trees and vegetation and subsequently burned. The land is then used for agriculture until all the nutrients of the soil is consumed. Then the next area is cleared, slashed and burned. After two years they go back to the first area that they slashed and burned and then slash and burn it again. Some of these burned trees manage to survive because the base of the tree survived the burning. They put forth new growth resulting into a living burned tree. Because of the cycle of slash and burn every few years, some material show good taper. I have a lot of materials from these places. These materials have very dramatic sabamiki with good tapering trunks. Some specimens are so beautiful; you can not stop yourself from getting it out of the ground and saving it. I will show you photos later.

You can also create sharis to hide trunk chops and bad features of your tree. By making that part dead, you could shape it using a grinder to hide the defect.

Bonsai Driftwood Video

{youtube:http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB4bRW_M0IM520420}