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# The Bonsai News of Houston

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE  
**Houston Bonsai Society, Inc.**

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Volume 36 Number 3, Internet Edition

March 2007

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## Monthly Meeting, Root-Over-Rock

The next meeting of the Houston Bonsai Society (HBS) will be held Wednesday, March 7, at 7:30 p.m. at the Houston Garden Center in Hermann Park, located at 1500 Hermann Drive. Refreshments will be served at 7 p.m.

At the March meeting, Donald Green will lead a workshop on planting trident maples on rocks. For a nominal \$10 fee, each participant will receive all of the material needed to get started on this elegant style of trident, including a suitable plant in a reusable PVC container, a rock, material to attach the roots to the rock, a growing container and soil. If you have a rock you would like to use for your composition, feel free to bring and use it.

The April program will be an open workshop. April is a good time to work on all kinds of trees, and this will also give members an opportunity to prepare their trees for the spring show.

## Study Group, March 17, Cabrera Farm

Our Saturday study group will meet March 17 at Cabrera Farm Nursery 3914 Cabrera Drive, Sugar Land 77479. See map and directions at the end of this newsletter. Everyone is welcome-- beginners and seasoned veterans. If you've never been to Cabrera nursery, treat yourself. The setting is beautiful and relaxing. You'll have a great time.

## Spring Bonsai Show

It's that time of year again, members, and our spring show is just around the corner. We will hold the spring show in conjunction with the Japan Festival the weekend of April 14th - 15th, in the Japanese Garden in Herman Park.

We will need volunteers to staff our exhibit and help up/take down the display.

## The Texas State Bonsai Exhibit

To support TTSB, use (and encourage your friends and family to use) <http://www.goodsearch.com> as an Internet search engine. Goodsearch.com will make a small payment to TTSBE for each such search. In the box labeled, "Who do you Goodsearch for?", type, "The Texas State Bonsai Exhibit." Goodsearch will remember your choice each time you visit.

The site is powered by Yahoo!, so you'll get the same quality search results as from any Yahoo search engine.

TTSBE has also been registered with Missionfish, an organization which channels money from eBay auctions to non-profit organizations. If you regularly sell on eBay, in the form that is filled out, there is an option to donate a percentage of the final sale to a charitable non-profit group. TTSBE is the only bonsai group listed. Please consider donating part of your sales to TTSBE.

TTSBE has also been registered on eBay and from time to time sells items on eBay under the user name [thetexasstatebonsaiaibit.inc](http://thetexasstatebonsaiaibit.inc).

## Membership Fees Due April 15

The deadline for renewing your HBS membership is April 15. Renew now to be sure you do not miss a single newsletter or any information about up-coming events. An individual membership is \$25.00; a family membership, \$30.00. A membership form appears at the end of this newsletter.

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## Monthly Bonsai Care

by John Miller

*John Miller, who writes a monthly column for the Bonsai Society of Dallas and the Fort Worth Bonsai Society, has agreed to share his column with us. We need to make adjustments for our warmer, damper climate, with its early springs, long summers, late falls and erratic winters.*

Amongst the repotting, you will have to be doing the twig pinching of the early growing species. Japanese maples will be growing furiously while the tridents need repotting. Maples and other species with alternately growing leaves should be pinched as soon as the new tip can be discerned. Sometimes this requires you to separate the newly formed leaves to find the tip. This tip should be plucked with tweezers in order to get it before it gets long enough to cut with scissors. Do not let these trees grow out to 4-6 leaves before pinching because it leads to long internodes.

Alternately growing species, elms and oaks, are handled a little differently. Let them grow out to 4-5 leaves and pinch back to 2-3 leaves, selecting the new bud according to which direction you want the new shoot to take. You will notice that the first leaves are smaller than the succeeding ones so by pinching regularly you will develop twigging with small leaves. More twigs divide the energy coming out the branch so that the later leaves will also be smaller. [Note: This is one of the "secrets" of making a good shohin.]

New foliage is usually very tender. If the sun gets very hot, you should give partial shade or at least have them protected from the afternoon sun and the wind.

Broadleaf evergreens, yaupons, boxwoods, etc., should be repotted when they show new buds starting. This is usually later than deciduous trees. Live oaks are not evergreens, they are termed, "tardily deciduous." They should be repotted when new growth starts. Usually, but not always, this is evidenced by the tree shedding its last year's foliage. For me, this is usually a week or two before the yaupons.

If you have wire on any trees, especially if from last year, check them carefully to prevent ugly wire marks. Better to rewire than to let them get too tight.

Warm humid spring weather is the favorite for many insects and fungal problems. Aphids get really wild but are easy to control. Ladybugs will clean a tree of aphids in a hurry. However you can't keep them around unless they have more food to eat. Use Garret Juice (old formula) on a regular basis.

Insecticides only work if you follow the label and use the recommended timing and number of sprays. You have to do repeat sprays to get those you missed the first time and also any hatching from eggs. That is why I use the organic Garret Juice (old formula-1 tablespoon each of liquid kelp, fish emulsion, 5% apple cider vinegar, and molasses in one gallon of water) on a regular basis, preferably weekly. However using it every other week will work on a maintenance level, *i.e.*, if you do not have an active problem.

Black spot is a fungal disease which affects my Chinese and Catlin elms and the yaupon hollies. Baking soda is an old standby for treating fungal foliage problems. Do not mix it in the G.J. because it reacts with vinegar.

Watering is usually not a big problem now, but you cannot ignore it. You need to observe each tree to determine which ones tend to dry out the fastest and remember that information to use later on when the heat gets here.

To enjoy your bonsai more, check your local calendar and plan to have at least one displayed in your show. Pick out a couple of your best trees. Keep them nicely groomed. Look for some sort of stands to display them on. Even a cork slab or a bamboo mat will give a tree a space of its own on the show table. Kokofu-ten might be able to be very selective, but we want all our members to participate and have the thrill of seeing someone stop in front of their tree.

Azaleas are better repotted at this time than after they bloom. The energy for blooming is already in the buds. They will have time to get new roots started before blooming. There will be much less stress on the tree than trying to repot in the heat of the late spring. Azaleas and most flowering plants produce much more buds than will look good when they are all open. Remove all but two of the buds on each small branch.

## Planting Ficus on Rock Slabs

by Pete Parker

January 2007

*Pete has almost twenty years' experience collecting and growing bonsai and has been a member of the HBS from about 1978 through 1984 and again from about 1995 to date. He has been a speaker at HBS meetings and is currently its first vice president. For several years now he has organized and led HBS's annual club dig and regularly wows us with his slab plantings. Thank you, Pete.*

Planting a tree or a small group on a rock slab improves the visual appeal of most trees. There is something about the natural ruggedness of the rock as a base for presentation of bonsai that enhances the composition and draws compliments for even ordinary bonsai. The intent of this article is to provide guidance on planting trees on slabs, with emphasis on ficus. Ficus are a popular and practical genus for slab plantings in Houston because their root systems can

*Cont'd next page.*



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handle drastic pruning, they develop well in small soil volumes, and they tolerate getting dry better than most plants.

To do such a project you will need:

- 1 The plant or plants
- 1 A choice of several rock slabs
- 2 Material to anchor the plants to the rock
- 3 Muck
- 4 Soil

### The Plants

Choosing plants to go on a slab is the same as for any bonsai. If you are going to plant an individual tree, pick a tree that has had training as a bonsai so that the shape and flow of the tree are apparent. For group plantings, make sure you have a good variety of sizes and more trees than you actually need for the planting before you begin.

### The Rocks

Rocks for such plantings should be relatively thin, about 1-2" thick for a medium sized tree, but must be strong enough to support the weight of the composition and survive the occasional bump while you are transporting it to the bonsai show. They should have curved, worn edges with movement and character. Edges can be worked with chisels and grinders. However, they will need to weather before they appear natural again after such alterations. Suitable rocks can be collected in many places where sedimentary rocks are exposed to the weather, and can also come from your local stone yard.

Like trees, rocks usually have a front and a back. The front will be characterized by the more interesting curves and movement, and possibly by being slightly lower than the back. Look over the candidate rocks for your planting and find the front of each stone.

Similarly, just as trees have a natural flow from one side to the other, so do the rock slabs. Generally the flow of the rock goes from the larger end to the smaller end or the higher area to the lower area; *i.e.*, from more visual mass to less. In planting a tree on a rock slab, you must match the flow of the tree to that of the rock. It simply will not feel right to you to plant a combination where the flows are in opposite directions. Imagine a rock slab with the larger, more substantial end on the left (rock flow is from left to right). Now match that in your mind with a tree leaning to the left (tree flows from right to left). Where on the rock would you locate the tree? Doesn't it feel awkward?

### Anchoring Material

To keep the tree stable on the rock slab and ensure fine roots are not disturbed, you should anchor the trees to the rock. The usual method for anchoring the plants is to attach wire tie downs to the rock. You can do this with most of the quick setting or regular epoxy glues found at your local hardware store. If you have a chance, experiment a little beforehand with the epoxy to be sure it will work. Wire should be the same size as you would use for anchoring the plant in a regular bonsai pot. It may also be handy to use

small rings (Hobby Lobby jewelry department) to provide reusable anchor points.

### Muck

Muck is not mandatory for making these plantings. You can do without, but plan on needing to add soil to the composition fairly frequently to maintain the soil volume. I also find that the muck makes for a more dramatic, finished look than going without.

There are numerous ways to make muck. I have used a mixture of 50% potter's clay and 50% regular peat moss fairly successfully in this application. Just knead the two together with sufficient water to make a thick mud pie consistency with no clay lumps in it.

Yvonne Padilla talked about making muck when she visited Houston last year. Yvonne uses the clay layer from her back yard and mixes that with an equal amount of sphagnum peat moss cut into 1" lengths and with sufficient water to make a very runny mixture. She lets it age in an open, flat container in her backyard, stirring it every few days and adding water if it dries out. After a month she has an aged muck with a thick mud pie consistency. Yvonne's approach is what you usually encounter in the literature.

### Soil

Butch Wilkins recommended this soil mix for slab plantings:

1. 1/3 normal bonsai mix for the tree. For a ficus in Houston, my normal mix is 50% screened Haydite and 50% screened pine bark mulch. I use two cuts of particles, 1/16" – 1/8" and 1/8" – 1/4". I adjust the blend according to the size of the tree, using up to 50% of the larger cut on large trees and none on shohin.
2. 1/3 good commercial potting soil
3. 1/3 sphagnum moss that has been torn or cut into 1" pieces.

While this mix may seem heavy for Houston weather, the combination of small soil volume and the heat absorption by the rock makes water management an important issue.

### Assembling Your Creation

So, now that you have all of the material you need, how do you put the pieces together?

1. Begin by working on the rock. Clean it well with a wire brush. If you need to alter the shape of the rock to improve movement or simply remove some weight, now is the time to do so. This work will require hammer and chisel or a grinder equipped to work on rock. Alan Raymond adjusted the bottom of a rock for a group planting to make it more stable by grinding it down on his driveway. Recognize that this is hard work and there is a risk of breaking a nice rock while you are fine tuning it.
2. Think through the layout of your composition.
  - a. Where will the tree(s) be planted?
  - b. Are you using any accent plants? If so, where will they go?

- c. Allow for negative space. One aspect of negative space with rock slabs is the opportunity to leave part of the surface of the rock bare. Doing so will add much to the drama and naturalness of the composition.
  - d. Take a look at where your anchors will go. Position them to make it easy to stabilize the tree(s) with wire from where they are placed.
  - e. Finally, take a piece of chalk and draw where the muck wall will be located taking your overall desired layout into account.
3. Now place the anchors
    - f. Clean the spots where the anchors will go with a wire brush again.
    - g. Blow or brush off the rock so that no dust will be where you intend to place the anchors.
    - h. Mix up your epoxy.
    - i. If you are using wire rings, then place some epoxy in the intended site and work the wire ring down into it until the epoxy covers the bottom of the wire ring. Use a bent piece of wire to hold the ring upright until the epoxy sets.
    - j. If you are not using wire rings, then cut a piece of wire of sufficient length to do your anchoring. Fold it around a pencil and use the pencil to twist it around 3-4 times making a pencil-sized loop in the middle of the wire. Bend the loop perpendicular to the two ends and use this as your anchor point with the epoxy. Once the loop is embedded in the epoxy you can bend the two ends until the wire supports itself and leave it until the epoxy sets.
  4. If your tree needs some additional styling, go ahead and do it before attaching it to the rock. It's easier to do beforehand. Similarly, for group plantings, go ahead and do what pruning and wiring you are certain needs to be done before proceeding.
  5. Assemble the composition (Make sure you have an uninterrupted block of time for steps k – q).
    - k. Build your muck retaining wall by following the chalk outline you drew earlier. Take handfuls of muck, shape them into rough cylinders about 1 ½" in diameter, place them on the chalk outline, and smooth them together with the adjoining pieces of muck and with the rock. In the end, you will have a wall that is about 1 ½" tall (this will vary as you go past uneven areas of the rock or according to your taste). The base is usually close to 2" thick while the top is rounded and maybe half the thickness of the base.
    - l. Add a thin layer of soil to the rock inside your muck wall.
    - m. Place the tree(s) according to your plan. Use the anchor wires and soil to adjust the positioning of the tree(s) until you are happy with the placement.
    - n. If you are using any accent plants, go ahead and place them in your composition using soil to stabilize them into position.
    - o. Add and chopstick in soil as you would for a normal bonsai.
    - p. Smooth out the soil so that you have the contour you want in your planting, and a nice smooth transition between the soil and your muck wall.
    - q. Water the composition using a fine spray.
    - r. Add moss. Moss is basically required if you have a muck wall.

### After Care

Several aspects of routine care and maintenance of these plantings are different from a normal bonsai:

1. As mentioned earlier in this article, these plants tend to dry out more quickly than a normal bonsai. You need to monitor their moisture level and water accordingly. In partial shade, I've found that one watering a day is sufficient for most of our weather. However, during very hot, dry periods I water these plantings twice a day.
2. Due to the small soil volumes, these plantings need a little more attention to fertilization than others. I try to maintain a viable time release fertilizer on the planting and then supplement that with fish emulsion every other week or so. If I had more time, I would probably go to supplementing every week.
3. Once the plant is on the rock, I do not remove it. Rather than "repotting", go in each year and use a chopstick to remove as much soil as possible. In cases where the root ball is particular tight and resists having the soil removed, cut 2-3 wedges out of the root ball to make room for new soil. Replace with the same mixture used in the planting originally and chopstick it in.
4. After a time, the muck wall may begin to crack and pieces may come off. Birds may also peck at the wall to get moss for nest building. It is simple to replace. Remove enough soil that you can work on the wall and replace the missing bit with fresh muck. Smooth it together with the existing wall and replace the soil.

### Conclusion

Hopefully this article has given you enough information that you can create your own ficus planting on a rock slab. I have certainly enjoyed not only the ones that I have made, but the process of creating them and owning the plantings afterwards. I hope you will have a similar experience and enjoy your creation for a long time to come.

### Calendar of Events

*The HBS meets the first Wednesday of every month at 7:30 p.m. in the Houston Garden Center in Hermann Park, 1500 Hermann Drive, next to the rose garden.*

- Mar. 7 Monthly meeting of the HBS. Donald Green, root-over-rock trident maple.
- Mar. 17 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Cabrera Farm Nursery
- Mar. 24 SSOT. Select shohin bonsai for LSBF convention, Large Plant Reduction workshop, 10:30, Persimmon Hill, Austin. For information, Terry or Sheila Ward, 512-280-5575 or [texshohin@sbcglobal.net](mailto:texshohin@sbcglobal.net).
- Apr. 14-15 Spring show in conjunction with the Japan Festival. Hermann Park Japanese Garden.
- Apr. 20-22 25<sup>th</sup> LSBF State Bonsai Convention, Dallas. Holiday Inn Select, 3300 W. Mockingbird.
- Apr. 21 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Bayland Park.
- May 19 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Bayland Park.
- June 16 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Cabrera Farm Nursery
- June 21-24 American Bonsai Society (ABS) with Virginia Bonsai Society. 2007 Learning Seminars. Virginia Beach at the Cavalier Resort Hotel. For information [www.absbonsai.org](http://www.absbonsai.org) or email [ABS@pfmbonsai.com](mailto:ABS@pfmbonsai.com)
- June 23 SSOT. Follow-up workshop: "Developing Exhibit Quality Shohin Bonsai." Persimmon Hill, Austin, 10:30
- July 4 **NO MONTHLY MEETING.**
- July 21 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Bayland Park.
- Aug. 18 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Bayland Park.
- Sept. 15 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Bayland Park.
- Sept. 15 SSOT, business meeting and "Pot Making Workshop for Accent Plants and Kusamono," Sheila Ward and Bob Swindle.
- Oct. 13-14 Fall bonsai show, Houston Garden Center, Hermann Park
- Oct. 20 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Bayland Park.
- Nov. 17 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Cabrera Farm Nursery
- Dec. 15 Saturday Study Group, 9 a.m., Bayland Park.

#### 2008

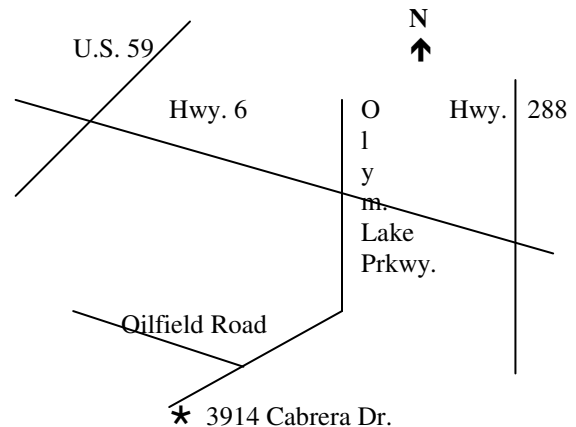
June 19-22 Convention hosted jointly by San Antonio, Austin and the American Bonsai Society at the Tropicana Hotel on the river walk

#### 2009

State LSBF bonsai convention in Houston.

### Directions to Cabrera Farm Nursery

From Houston take Hwy. 59 south towards Sugar Land. Exit at Hwy. 6 and go under the freeway. Go several miles to Lake Olympia Parkway and turn right. The street name changes to Oilfield Road. Proceed approximately 0.9 miles. Oilfield Road will make a sharp turn to the left (a 90 degree turn). Continue on Oilfield Road another 1.6 miles. When Oilfield Road makes a sharp turn to the right, continue straight. You will then be on Cabrera Drive. Follow Cabrera into the nursery.



For another map, see [www.orchidsandbonsai.com](http://www.orchidsandbonsai.com) or call 281-313-2000.

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For special requests or questions related to *The Bonsai News of Houston*, contact the Editor, Dolores Plaisted, e-mail [BonsaiNews@ev1.net](mailto:BonsaiNews@ev1.net) or the **Houston Bonsai Society, Inc., P. O. Box 540727, Houston, Texas 77254-0727**, [www.HoustonBonsai.com](http://www.HoustonBonsai.com).

The deadline for submission of articles is 8:00 p.m. the Wednesday 2 weeks before the monthly meeting. *The Bonsai News of Houston* is available by e-mail. To receive a copy by e-mail instead of regular mail, contact the editor at address above.

Space for advertising in *The Bonsai News of Houston* can be requested by contacting the editor. Advertising rates for a business-card-sized ad (approx. 3 1/2" x 2") are \$6 per month, \$30 for 6 months and \$50 per year (12 issues). A full-page ad is \$25 per month. Rates are subject to change without notice. 3 1/2" x 2" classified ads are run free of charge for one month once per 12-month period, for noncommercial members.

# HOUSTON BONSAI SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

(Please fill out and mail in or bring to a meeting)

Today's Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Membership Type:** (Select one) \_\_\_\_\_ Individual (\$25.00) \_\_\_\_\_ Family (\$30.00)

**Membership Classification:** (Select one)

\_\_\_\_ Local member      \_\_\_\_ Out of town member      \_\_\_\_ Vendor      \_\_\_\_ Bonsai club

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_ **STREET:** \_\_\_\_\_

**CITY:** \_\_\_\_\_ **STATE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **ZIP CODE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**HOME PHONE:** ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ **WORK PHONE:** ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ **E-MAIL** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ *Do not publish my address to general membership*      \_\_\_\_\_ *Call here ONLY if absolutely necessary*

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