

# BONSAI

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Visiting  
with the  
Masters—  
Reiner Goebel

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Roots  
and  
Shoots



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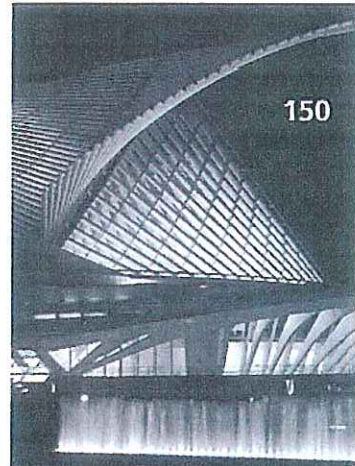


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# The Temple Tree

By John Romano



Before April 98



Finished

**W**HEN IS A TREE TOO BIG to be called a bonsai? Being too small seems never to be a problem but how about too large? Bonsai is about creating an illusion, an inspiring snapshot of nature that will elicit a response from the viewer. If a tree's form and demeanor are evocative to the viewer, the artist has accomplished his or her task regardless of its size. So, in this regard, size does not matter. By definition, a bonsai is a tree (or other suitably acceptable plant) planted in (or on) some kind of container (natural or man-made). This article introduces a tree collected from the wild that is quite large and yet was actually reduced quite a bit for display as a bonsai. Is it bon-

sai or landscape plant? This is not for me to answer but to let you make up your own mind. I will chronicle the repotting and initial pruning of this very large Eastern White Cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*) that was collected by Nick Lenz and friends and how it came to be a bonsai in his collection.

The first obvious question is—why did he collect it? For Nick Lenz, 'on a whim' would be as good a reason as any would be. Nick, his son, and a collecting companion, Jonathan Fisk, were looking for potential bonsai material in an area soon to be leveled for development on the Lake Huron side of the Bruce Peninsula near the Niagara Escarpment. This was in the late summer of 1992.

While gazing upon a 12-foot tall specimen, Nick asked his friend (while his child giggled); "Do you think that this would make a good bonsai?" "No, it is *too* big!" was the quick reply. Who could resist such a challenge! Nick took out his folding saw and in a few minutes reduced the foliage of the tree somewhat to reveal a potentially nice 'form within a form' and asked again, "How about this?" "Do you suppose it could make a good bonsai?" Jonathan replied, "I dunno." "OK, let's collect it and find out," was Nick's retort.

The tree in situ presented some problems. The obvious one was reducing it to fit in the mini-van they brought along! As it stood in the field, it was 12' tall by 12' wide.





"This is what we're 'gonna' do"

It first had to be reduced both vertically and horizontally, after which it took about an hour and a half to extract the useable roots from the ground. Some longer wandering roots were cut back but there were many smaller ones close to the trunk. The roots were situated on limestone so were not impossible to remove. After this extraction, the tree was now reduced to a more manageable size of 6' by 6'. The three of them carried it ¼ mile back to the minivan where it had some more minor pruning to allow it to fit in there.

The tree was taken back to North Leverett, Massachusetts where it was planted in a very large wooden box and left to recover in a shaded area for a few years. The original planting was in a fine soil mix worked into



Removing from cedar box

the original black duff. Nick finds that White Cedar do much better when a portion of the original soil is retained in the initial potting and a finer size soil mix is used.

Cedars that he has transplanted in traditional coarse bonsai mixes exclusively did not exhibit the lushness of those potted in a finer bonsai mix with a good percentage of organic matter in it. During this recovery time the pH was also increased to 5.5 from 4.5. In the 3rd year, the tree was reduced further and provided with more sunlight. It was in the 4th year that the tree was moved to the pond area, reduced further and planted in a training box about ½ the size of the former. At this time, a commercial bonsai mix was used exclusively and the tree did not



Placing on slab

respond as well. Its growth was minimal and lacked vigor. This would have been 1997. A part of a main root was cut off and examined later by Nick. He was very surprised that he was able to count approximately 450 rings! He had to use multiple lenses and a micro pointer to do this.

In the spring of 1998 our club, the Rhode Island Bonsai Society, visited Nick to tour his most unique collection of bonsai creations. After viewing the trees and garden and then purchasing some of his pots. We were treated to a pruning demonstration on the old Cedar by the pond. Seizing on an enthusiastic audience, Nick enlisted us to come back the following Spring to plant the tree in



Cutting unnecessary roots

its permanent location. Many of us wondered if Nick's kiln was big enough to make a pot for it, until it was revealed that it would be planted on a large slab that was recovered previously on Nick's land and placed right next to his small pond.

On returning in the spring of 1999, our club went to work under Nick's direction. After preparing the slab, we removed the tree from the box. Although four of us were used for this, the tree was surprisingly light. I had forgotten how light cedar wood was! It was placed on the slab after which we carefully combed out the roots to allow them to spread on the surface of the slab. Some larger roots were pruned out and small feeder ones were treated with care. Nick added some of the fine bonsai soil mix that was preferred by this species, working it into and around the root mass. He also sprinkled some more lime into the soil to keep the pH balanced.

Some of the longer roots were placed over the rear edge of the slab into the surrounding ground. This was done for a couple of reasons. First, it would allow the tree to grow more abundantly—the roots could be reduced later. Also, it would help to stabilize the tree. The Cedar was slanting towards the right and, since there were no wires anchored to the slab, it would take some time for it to stand on its own roots. Initially a rope was used to anchor the tree in





Ropes and stakes are used to anchor and position the tree to the slab

position. It was attached to two wooden stakes in the ground.

The position of the tree was critical for Nick, who spends his summer nights sitting by the pond being serenaded by croaking toads and other nefarious wild beasts (while fighting off the deadly New England mosquitoes!) As he sat in his throne (an old folding chair) we were cajoled into adjusting the tree's position slightly this way and that until he was satisfied with its placement. Thus the tree adorned the temple of Lenz land.

Before any final tweaking, we took a break to collect a great deal of moss necessary to cover the soil to



Nick approves the position



Collecting moss at the stream bed

protect against erosion. We drove to a nearby stream bed that provided a large amount of moss on its rocks and shore. Back to the tree, we added the moss and Nick did some cursory pruning. The tree was still in the growing out stage so was not wired nor the dead wood worked on.



After applying moss

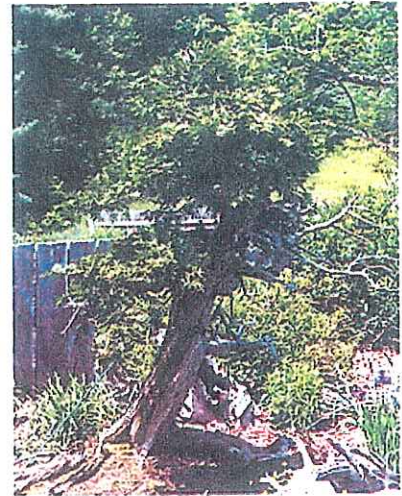
That would come in time.

The final photo shows the tree two years later (this past Spring, 2001) as it appears with increasing vigor. We

attempted to prop up the tree and remove the rope but it was still not anchored enough to stand on its own without some support. Oh, well, 450 years to this point—another few won't matter!

Bonsai or landscape tree? Who cares? Is the question relevant? What does this tree evoke in your consciousness?

Comfort, inspiration, remembrance of a far off wilderness, a fantasy of some sort? The journey of this specimen from wild tree to a bit more refined bonsai has more to do with unleashing a hidden form of delight than in the preservation of an aged



May 2001, growing nicely

museum piece. It was a group effort. One person saw its potential. Another prodded him on. Some pulled out their backs while transporting it. Others pruned, ported, anchored, and admired its radiance. The Temple tree invites us into its welcoming presence...Enjoy.



#### John Romano

is a second term ABS director and is the manager of the Book Service. He was a former rare book dealer and book-binder and currently

has a company manufacturing custom made portfolio boxes. Bonsai is his avocation and he teaches at New England Bonsai Gardens in Massachusetts. He is also the President of the RI Bonsai Society.