

## RASHISA, AND THE PURSUIT OF DEADWOOD PRESERVATION by Rob Owen

For a plant in a pot to be recognised as a good bonsai, our work must be creative, considered, and almost imperceptible.

The *typicality*, or *rashisa* of the species is the final goal!

Observe trees in their natural habitat. Consider its immediate environment.

*Understand* your tree. Then add a little imagination!

Go on nature walks in open and wooded areas, and see how trees grow, age and decay.

Deadwood results from health/root issues, or exposure to weather, e.g. sun, cold, rain, salt spray, insect attacks, lightning strikes, disease, wind, fire, drought, and old age! Examples of beautiful deadwood abound in those areas of the world where trees live at higher altitudes, where the sap and resins prolong the fibres of their being. Old trees often identify with sections that have died (Shari). It remains as a stark visual reminder of its life. Some heartwoods rot away, leaving mysterious caves and cavities. The Japanese word for this is *Sabamiki*. Branches, are split or ripped off in severe storms, (Jin), or the sheer weight of snow. It should tell a story, but, deadwood, (even though a focal point) cannot take precedence over the tree itself!

Tony Tickle from the UK, an artist I've come to admire, stresses that one should never have "*deadwood for deadwoods sake!*". As already mentioned, your work must be inconspicuous, blending in with the existing deadwood (*if any*) and the tree itself! He goes on, "*do not rely on the deadwood features alone to enhance an otherwise mundane tree*", and to "*use your botanical knowledge and the creative techniques at your disposal to refine and grow excellent bonsai*".

Preserving, and re-creating such detailed deadwood images is in itself is an 'art form' that few bonsai enthusiasts seem to have the necessary skills to reproduce convincingly.

Interpreting this 'naturally' is an all important and exciting dimension to creating dramatic trees within a relatively short span of time.

The thing we don't have on our side is time. We need to assist the wood visually in the process of attrition that would occur within decades when found in a natural environment. As Professor Snape quipped in Harry Potter, "*I can even teach you to put a stopper in death!*". So now, with a little information, inspiration, imagination, and theatre, your trees can move into a new, 'and convincing realm'

Assuming you have temporally sealed the existing or carved deadwood with a bonding liquid - be it with plaster key or stone sealer<sup>1</sup> - thereby stopping it from drying out too quickly, we can now proceed.

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<sup>1</sup> This aids the tree to build up its own internal protective structures against rapid exposure

Some of things you will need include:

### LIQUIDS ( available from hardware stores, Nurseries, or Herbert Evans)

- Lime sulphur (hydrogen sulphide) or 'Jinseal' (a preservative, and also a great wood hardener, if a dedicated product is not available)
- Ox gall, a 'water tension breaker' or 'dishwashing liquid concentrate', which also acts as a workable wetting agent. I don't like the fact that it remains soapy and oily if used too liberally! Use just a few drops!
- Liquid 'super glue' (be careful with this) or equivalent
- High quality deep penetrating preservative, (a quality local wax-based brand is also ok..just read for harmful additives?)
- (For advanced wood repair) Gesso, or a flexi- seal paste. 'Pro-Fill' seems to work well and is available locally
- Rubber based, 'art masking fluid', (necessary if you don't have a steady hand)
- Water based transparentiser (for acrylics)
- Turpentine (natural, artist's brand) or White Spirit.
- Rubberised bitumen (Super Laykold by a.b.e.)
- Quality white PVA, quality UV resistant waterproof inks, black, sienna, nut brown, and ochre. For advanced techniques, use acrylic and oil mediums, including transparentiser, black, various brown hues, blues, greens, and ivory white. If you use oils, only seal when dry, ± 6 weeks

### MATERIALS

- Cheesecloth, or old rags and sponge and a suitable work surface
- Water spray bottle - I have a few cheapies, they don't last!
- A bowl, plus any small mixing trays or/and small cups.
- Masking tape, and plastic wrap/ shopping bags/ bin bags, or similar
- Various small to medium paint brushes (clean with turpentine/white spirit)
- Set of wire and nylon brushes, toothbrushes, and mouthwash (OOPS! No, sorry!).
- Fine grit sand or water paper (±180 grade)
- Turntable, or a tray to catch the excess liquid run-off
- Apron and/or old clothes (bitumen stains)

### GENTLY DOES IT!

Identify the *typicality* or *rashisa* of the species! Is it highland, lowland or coastal?

How would the deadwood age or decay? Does it have heartwood or not?

Would it change colour? Is the wood soft or durable? Would the grain egress?

Over time, the exposed areas will continue to decay, so halting the natural process and the preservation of the deadwood is important to your longterm plan for the tree, and its health!

*Est ce que vous êtes prêt? (are you ready?) as my mentor Francois Gau quips! or my favourite, "the difference between a good tree and a bad tree is a mistake". Only kidding! The difference, of course, is your creative input!*

Right! First things first! Protect the soil and the container!

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- If the the pot is accommodating enough, place it on a turntable - this is much easier, trust me.
- Cover the soil, and pot with plastic wrap.
- Secure the wrap around the trunk base with masking tape.
- If the bark is rough or corky, a little mastic, or masking fluid in the gaps will have you sorted! Do not leave a 'collar'. Whatever runs off must continue on its way over the cover and off the pot.

The only real dangerous chemical here (to the tree of course) is the *lime sulphur*, *white spirit*, and *turpentine*. The others listed are pretty inert if they happen to seep into the soil.

- Brush away gently as much surface rot as possible. Some decay might still be attractive on the tree, and should be retained - this can be hardened and preserved! Remember that the decayed wood is all part of its history!

*Re-Construction and Repair:*

*[The next part of this process is the re-construction of 'necessary wood' lost. But that's a chapter for another time.- Conjoining parts of the tree that are devoid of wood, only the live veins are holding it together. 'Buddleja Saligna' for example, is notorious here unless the wood is 40 years or more older!]*

### Step 1 - Lime Sulphur Application

Protect the live cambium edge with masking fluid. Let dry.

It's important now to dampen the wood with your spray bottle.

Put a little undiluted *lime sulphur* in a container with a few drops of ox gall (*wetting agent*) and hold your nose, as it reeks of rotten eggs. Just be careful that you put this strong chemical EXACTLY where you want it. You will learn to respect it! It stains, and if it leaches into the soil, necessary bacteria will die!

Apply the *lime sulphur* by brush to the deadwood in small amounts to avoid run-off. If some should spill, wipe off immediately with an absorbent damp cloth, or sponge, and give it a blast with your spray bottle.

The wood will turn an awful *yellow gunge* at first, then, as it dries (drying time, 2-5 days) it will change to a *grey-white*. You might want to do another coat or two again while it dries, especially if you want to 'harden up' soft sections - apply a drop or two of liquid instant glue, or hardener if necessary 'before' the lime sulphur dries. You want the wood to absorb this treatment deep into the fibres! [Repeat the *lime*

*sulphur* application twice per annum, then once thereafter. Always add the 'water tension breaker' to aid adhesion when you re-apply. The *lime sulphur* and *preservative* are impervious to moisture without *ox gall*, in the short term!]

Efficacy of *lime sulphur* diminishes once opened, so rather purchase a small bottle, and displace the liquid used with pebbles, or marbles up to the narrow neck of the container. This reduces oxidisation with the air, which crystallises the product and renders it useless. Being a protective winter application, *lime sulphur* is not that easily available in the summer months.

When grey-white and dry, brush the excess crusty residue away with a soft nylon brush to re-enhance the grain once more.

Now stand back and consider your bonsai once more.

As covered earlier, what tones and colours would suite the species and your deadwood vision? Highland- *bleached, stark and dry*, or lowland forest- darker hues maybe, and *damp, with hollowed trunk, cavities, and moss*? Hmmmmm?

Don't be too nervous about these preservation methods, as they are all flexible should you change your mind about the direction. Your tree, and you, will hopefully change over time anyway. Relax and enjoy it!

If you are satisfied with the look of the deadwood, and it is in keeping with what it would be like in nature, you can do either one of the two following methods:

#### Method 1

Wash diluted ink, mixed with a drop or two of *ox gall* over the surface while 'spritzing' lightly with your mister, and let dry.. Sand, or rub gently with a damp cloth, (preferable), then brush off the residue.

Are you happy with the colour and grain definition? If not wash another dilute form of colour over the previous and let dry... add a little transparentiser if you think necessary, and rub again with a damp cloth or use your finger to bring up the grain or push back the colour. Multiple applications of ink are preferable to achieve translucency (remove any unwanted ink with a little Windolene).

\*Always use your spray bottle- It's wet work! No "dry-brushing" please?

\*At all times, strive for a natural look! Whatever technique you apply, it must visually seem to be at one with the 'depth of the wood', and not, 'sticking on the surface'...

When dry, gently brush on the wood preserver and, as it is absorbed, re-apply. Depending on the wood, you can repeat the application twice or more over a year, or when you no longer notice 'moisture beads' forming when irrigating. (The product will become invisible after a few days).

## Method 2

This method is one of my favourites (and is a technique used by many artists in France and other areas of Europe). It is relatively simple to execute!

Follow step 1 (as written above), then do the following:

Take a small amount of rubberised bitumen,(already a great preservative! ),and dilute,( 1-4 ) in water, add a few drops of ox gall, and brush onto the surface gently. The application should be a watery *nut brown tint, then dry to a darker hue. If you apply too thickly, it will dry black!* This is not what you want! If this happens (or if you need to cleanup and/or refine) use natural turpentine, white spirit, or wood preserver after it has dried- just not the cheap hardware varieties, these are precious trees!

Again, ALWAYS have your spray bottle in hand to further dilute until satisfied! Paint, spray, paint, spray...The product dries quickly, so work methodically! Take scraps of pre-prepared deadwood and practice, practice, practice. When dry, apply clear preservative as earlier described.

Here's the kicker, this great technique can also be applied to ROCKS!

### SOME HELPFUL TIPS:

- You can use preserver to dissolve dried bitumen, or thin/enhance the grain.
- Windolene is used to dissolve waterproof inks. Rub with your finger and/or cloth over the surface to enhance the grain.
- Artist's 'White Spirit' is an odourless mineral turpentine of a very high quality. It may be used to rub through dried rubberised bitumen, brush clean-up, pot cleaning, and diluting oil based paint
- Refined linseed oil is of the highest purity and may be used with oil paint as a preservative, and as a burnish for your treasured pots.(never gets sticky)
- Try to avoid cold glue and varnishes. Its unsightly sheen does not take paint well, it's hard to remove, shrinks and cracks, trapping moisture, nasty!
- Artist's 'Rubber Masking Fluid' is a great protection on the live areas surrounding the deadwood (I've used 'wound sealant' for the same purpose, without success. When your work is complete, simply rub it off with your finger and/or cloth!
- Avoid oil based wood preservatives as it attracts dirt and, over time, darkens the wood.
  
- A final point to remember. Deadwood features are strong focal points and an integral part of your tree, so they should be considered with the utmost care, skill, and sensitivity. *It is ABSOLUTELY necessary that the final finish is MATT.* A soft sheen is only convincing if a hippo has been using your tree as a scratching post!

And there you go! Happy preserving, fellow enthusiasts, and keep it real, well, sort of...as long as it looks real! That's all I'm saying!