Artificial Ageing Techniques for Bonsai

By: Les Lonsdale

There are many techniques that we use to give bonsai an 'aged' look; in fact part of the *art* of bonsai is the art of 'illusion', making a young tree look older than it really is.

Artificial ageing techniques include:

- Taper of trunk
- Exposed nebari
- Drooping limbs

And then there are the '**deadwood techniques**' that really enhance the apparent age of the tree. They include:

- Jin
- Shari
- Sabamiki – Hollow trunk
- Uro
- Phoenix graft (Tanuki)

We will discuss the last 5 techniques here. All of the deadwood techniques are designed primarily for conifers which contain sap which heals wounds quickly.

NOTE: In general, these techniques (except for Uro) would not be appropriate for broadleaf trees with a few exceptions: olive, elm, boxwood, buttonwood, tamarind, black locust, white oak.

* All of these techniques are best performed in Summer when the tree is in active growth.

*Trees should be in good health before performing such drastic techniques.

Jin – stripping away the bark and part of the wood from branches and tree tops in order to create an aged appearance and to replicate natural phenomena that occur in nature. It can also be used to shorten conifers that are too tall. Lime sulphur can be applied to give a 'sun bleached' effect.

Shari – similar to jin, except this term is used for stripping the bark off of the main trunk rather than branches and tips. Strips of bark are peeled or carved downward to give the appearance of a lightening strike or other superficial damage to the trunk.

Sabamiki – hollow or split trunk. A trunk splitting technique that simulates a lightening strike or other severe damage to a trunk. It is accomplished using a trunk-splitting bonsai tool, or chisel, hammer, etc.

Usually on the lower part of the tree, the trunk is split for a short way and something like a chopstick or pebble is placed in the wound to keep it from closing. A dremel can be used to widen the split and to give it character and a natural look. The split can be shallow or deep or even go completely through the tree.

Lime sulphur can be mixed with black ink or acrylic paint to preserve the wood and give it a darker appearance inside. Wood hardener can then be applied to preserve the wood from further decay.

Uro – literally 'to carve out'. In nature it occurs when a limb dies and drops from the tree. The area rots out and forms a hollow where the branch was attached to the tree. In bonsai, the technique can be used to turn an otherwise ugly scar into an interesting character-enhancing deadwood feature.

For aesthetics, the hollow should not be round, but irregular or oval. Lime sulphur mixed with black ink or acrylic paint can be dabbed into the hole to preserve the wood and give a darker appearance inside. Wood hardener can then be applied to preserve the wood from further decay.

Phoenix graft (Tanuki) – The deceptive technique of fastening a young pliable juniper to a piece of deadwood (driftwood) in order to give the appearance of an old tree full of jin and shari, but clinging to life with apparent new growth within the deadwood.

The trick is finding an interesting piece of deadwood, then finding the right small juniper that will look good attached to it, and making it all look natural!

A groove is made in the deadwood in which the young tree is pressed into and usually held in place with brass screws. The limbs of the live tree are wired to look as if they are growing out of the dead wood.

Jin / shari







Sabamiki







Uro



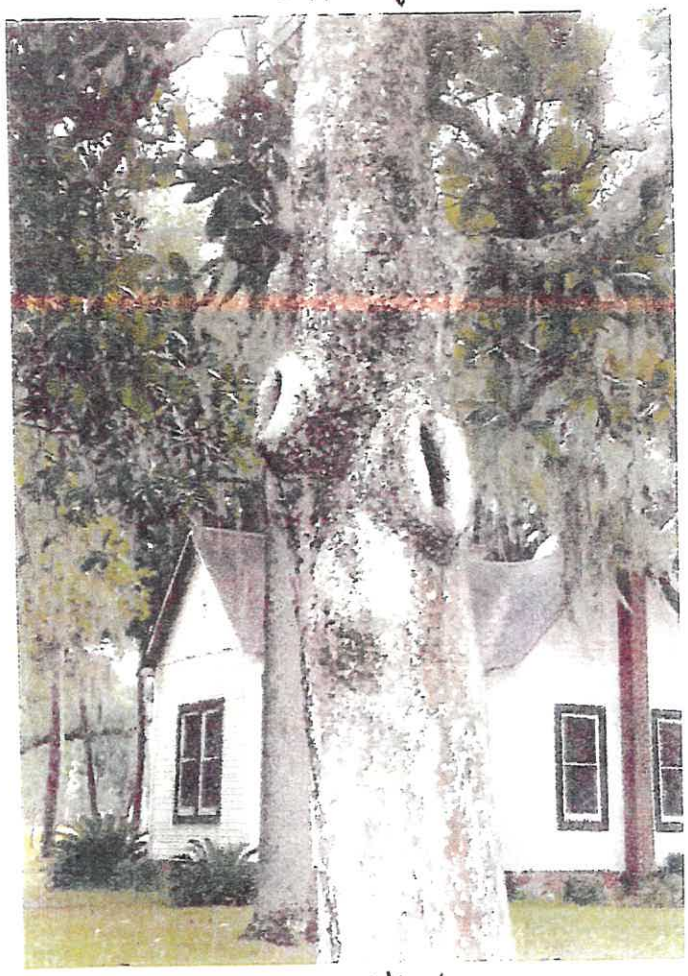



Pheonix graft (tanuki)

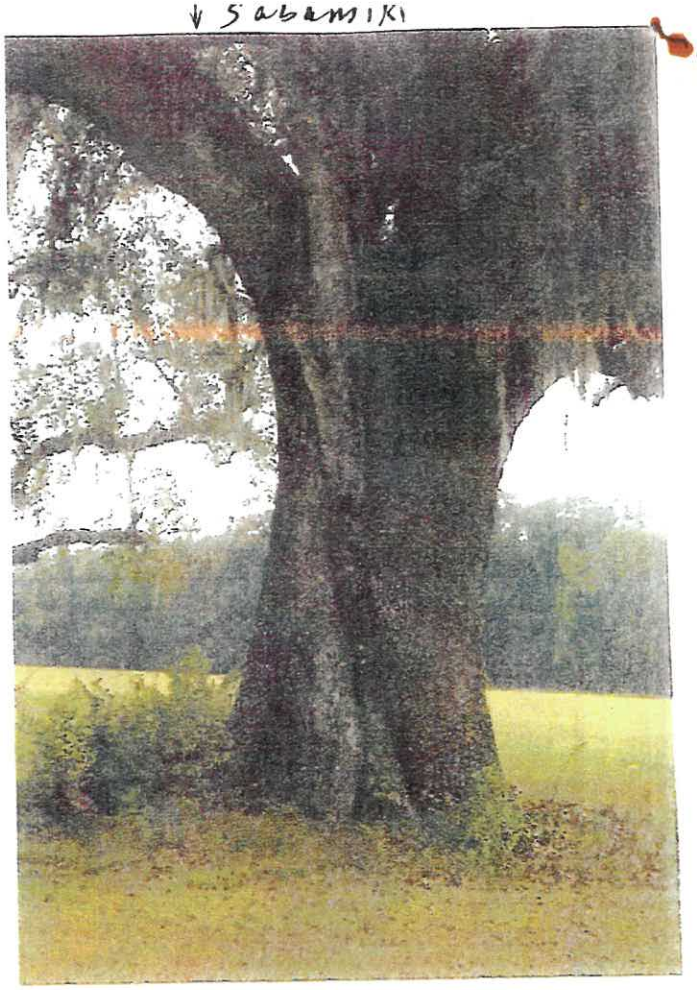





URO ↓



↓ Sabamiki



Sabamiki ↓



URO ↓

