

# Japanese Black Pine Redesign

By Randy Bennett

The subject of this redesign is a Japanese Black Pine from the collection of a client. He had the tree for a number of years. I am not certain about the age of the tree, but he stated that he had been growing it for 8 years. The tree stood 18 inches above the soil and was 25 inches across. It was potted in a dark brown, unglazed 14 inch oval that was 3 inches deep. It was obvious that the tree had been worked for a number of years due to the density of the foliage and the number of shoots.

The tree was healthy. It had good color and there was significant back-budding that had occurred. However, no matter how healthy a black pine may be, you should try to remove no more than 1/3 of the foliage at one time and certainly never more than half. Removing much more than that may weaken it beyond its ability to recover. The complete redesign of this tree took three years. What you see in this article took place in year one.

As a bonsai, this tree was not particularly remarkable. With selective pruning and proper wiring, its appearance could have been improved but the trunk was thin – about an inch and a half in diameter at the base and it possessed very little taper for an informal upright or slanting style bonsai.

The photo below shows the tree as it was brought to me in January. I placed a pair of pruning shears in the photo to give a sense of scale.



The second photo shows the back of the tree as I began to examine design possibilities by changing the viewing angles.



After viewing the tree from a number of angles, a decision was made. The tree had good movement but no taper. The best solution to improve the quality of the tree was to design it as a bunjin. However, the bunjin design was not brought to fruition for two more years after this part of the restyling was completed. As a temporary transition, it was styled as a semi-cascade so that the client could enjoy the tree until the final transformation into a bunjin could be achieved. The temporary styling into a semi-cascade allowed me to set up the proper inclination of the trunk, get branches wired to their correct angles and get new candle growth occurring in the proper direction in preparation for the final design which would take place in another year.

First, all of the foliage on the lower portion of the tree was removed and it was examined from various viewpoints. The amount of foliage removed was pushing the limits of the tree, but it was in good health and I was confident that it would recover quickly.



I liked the direction in which the tree was heading, but the angle was still not quite right. The pot was stabilized in a plastic garbage can so that a little more thinning could be done and wiring and shaping of the branches. You never want to prune and wire branches until you have the tree at angle it will have when repotted. Otherwise you may remove branches that you need and wiring and putting branches into the proper position will be done without proper focus.



The photo below shows the pine after more thinning, wiring the branches and repotting. However, the work is not finished. I removed a good deal of foliage in this initial redesign. But care had to be taken not to remove too much at once. To create a proper bunjin all of the foliage that was wired down and to the front will also be removed – but not this year.

The tree underwent a great deal of stress. It had to be allowed to recover and regain its strength. Therefore candle pruning and removal was carried out judiciously. You do not want to further weaken the tree. The tree was fertilized with organic fertilizer beginning March 1<sup>st</sup>. Fertilizing was repeated on April 1<sup>st</sup> and the final application was given on May 1<sup>st</sup>. You do not fertilize black pines beyond May 1<sup>st</sup> so that when you conduct candle-pruning around the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, you are not getting unwanted, leggy growth on the new shoots.

Normally, you would not conduct candle pruning on a pine so quickly after repotting. But in this case, very few of the roots had to be pruned. And they could easily be placed in the deeper container. As such, the repot did not significantly weaken the tree and so selective candle-pruning could be carried out.

It is not the focus of this brief article to elaborate on how to candle-prune black pines. That is an exhaustive topic and one that can be quite confusing to a lot of people. My purpose here is simply to illustrate how a redesign was carried out to improve the value and quality of a bonsai.

The three largest and lowest branches on the tree did not have their candles pruned or pinched. Allowing them to grow unrestrained helped the tree regain some of the strength it lost through the redesign process. To allow the candles in the upper half of the remaining



foliage to grow unrestrained would have been a mistake. Every candle was removed around June 1<sup>st</sup> – even the weakest candles.



During the 1<sup>st</sup> week in July, the new shoots that formed where entire candles were removed were thinned to only two shoots. In November, the new growth from July was strong. Given the fact that the roots were only lightly trimmed when repotting was done 10 months before helped ensure a quick and strong recovery. The two lowest large branches that were wired down and to the front, were then removed. All of the food that their needles produced during the past growing season were sent to the remaining foliage in the spring.



The tree remained in the semi-cascade pot for one more year and candle pruning was carried out again during the next growth season. The following winter, the tree was repotted into a bunjin container.



