Water Elm : Year Two

By Randy Bennett

In August of 2018, Jim Osborne, Dennis Burke and I drove to Catahoula Lake to collect a few bald cypress and water elm. I collected one water elm and wrote an article about Catahoula Lake and our collecting trip. In the article, published in the February 2019 issue of the GNOBS Newsletter, I presented a plan for the development of that water elm. If you are unfamiliar with the article, it is posted under the "Resources" tab on the club website. Scroll down and click on "Newletters". You will find it there.

We collect trees on the bed of Catahoula Lake in July, August and early September because that's when most of the water has been drained from the lake each year. Once we find a tree worthy of collecting, we cut it back to a stump. The foliage that remains is sprayed with Wilt-Pruf to prevent water transpiration. The Wilt-Pruf is applied to both sides of the leaves and seals them for about four weeks – long enough for the plant to overcome transplant shock and begin putting out new growth.

In the article, I discussed how I bare-rooted the tree after getting it home and potted it in Miracle-Grow Potting Mix. I avoid bonsai soil with water elms for the same reason I avoid it with bald cypress. Both species are at home in the water and thrive with their roots staying wet all the time. And bonsai soil dries out too quickly for both these species. More than one water elm has been lost due to bonsai soil. They're not called **water** elms for nothing!

My collected water elm the day after collecting

The tree started putting out new growth and new shoots in September. As you can see from the photo on the right in the pictures above, there were too many shoots emanating from the base to yield a good design. So the plan was that in January of 2019, when the tree had grown dormant, some of the basal shoots were pruned away, leaving only three, not counting the main trunk. At the time, I planned to use a low-growing branch on the left side of the main trunk to serve as another trunk.

The basal shoots were all about the same size. So during the 'Growth for Size Stage', the original plan was to allow the three small shoots that remained to grow during the next two growing seasons to develop differentiation in trunk size by pruning and restraining growth on two of the shoots and allowing the other to grow freely.

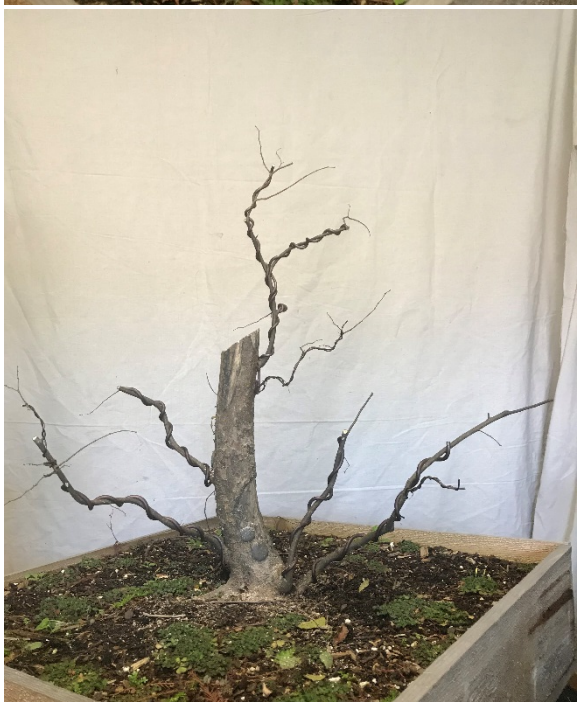
While that process was going on, I would begin developing the shoots on the main trunk and selecting new shoots on the three smaller trunks to begin developing options for future branch structure.

Below is my rendering of how the tree would look after about five years of development.

However, when January 2019 rolled around and I began to more closely examine the growth that had occurred during the previous three months, my design changed slightly. I decided that keeping the low-growing branch on the left side of the main trunk and treating it as another trunk would not work. It did not emanate from the base and was too high up on the trunk. It looked artificial as a separate trunk and so I decided to treat it as a primary branch.

That meant eliminating one of the smaller trunks and create a three-trunk design.

The above photo was taken in January of 2019, after the tree had gone completely dormant.



Photos were taken January 2019

The photo above and on the left shows the new front with all but two of the basal shoots removed. Note that the two shoots are almost exactly the same size. you can also see what I mean about the branch on the left really being too high to serve as a separate trunk.

The photo on the right shows the tree after reducing the trunk. If you look closely, you will notice the dead area in the middle of the trunk where it was cut. You may also notice that there is another area that is dead a couple of inches above the two trunks on the right.

The plan is to carve the deadwood at the point of the stump-cut to make it look natural and then completely hollow out the trunk in order to connect the two dead areas.

Photos taken in December of 2019. Notice the amount of growth that has occurred.

The only pruning done was a single cut in June of 2019 on the middle trunk. The purpose was to slow down the growth on that trunk and begin to develop variation in the trunk diameters.

By allowing unrestrained growth for three months after collecting and virtually unrestrained growth all during 2019, the tree has increased significantly at the base. The trunk diameter above the two trunks on the right and below the branch on the left of the main trunk has increased from just over 2 inches to 3 inches. The nebari has increased from just over 5 inches to over 6 inches.

Moreover, it is vital, on newly collected stock, that you allow unretrained growth for the next two years so that the collected material regain its' strength before carrying out extensive styling.

Photo taken in late December of 2019. You can see that the base has significantly increased in size from over a year ago. You can also clearly see the notch of eadwood near the apex and the portion of the main trunk that has died as a result of some previous trauma it sustained. The area between the two areas of deadwood is very much alive.

The photos above show the tree after pruning on December 18, 2019. The photo on the left looks odd because the lower part of the tree was in shadow and the upper part in full sun and in my haste, I neglected to take a better picture. The photo on the right was take after a little more pruning. It also shows that some of the branches were wired and pulled down for the 2020 growing season.

The tree will be allowed to grow freely until May of 2020. At that time, it will be pruned back and rewired. At that time, I will consider the tree to clearly be in the “Growth for Design

Stage." Depending on how things develop, I may leave the tree in the grow box for the 2021 growing season before moving it into a bonsai container.

I will give you an update on this trees development in the June 2020 GNOBS Newsletter and again at about this time next year so you can see the ongoing progress.