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Introducing . . . The Ficus

In this issue we begin a series of articles dealing with specific tree species. We will start with the more common and difficult to kill plants and cover some more challenging tree types at a later point.

This month we will look at the Ficus family.

Ficus (fig trees to us laymen) are found throughout the world and South Africa has numerous varieties, many of them well suited to bonsai, others have large leaves and are best left alone. Figs have a lot going for them from our point of view. They grow fast, and everywhere, particularly in Durban where they seem to spring up in the most outrageous places. Drain pipes, concrete bridges and even the shear walls of buildings all seem to be prime real estate for figs.

Their roots actively seek water, and frequently cause damage to plumbing and water pipes. Their ability to cling to rocks makes them ideal for the Root-over-rock style. Their branches are quite flexible particularly when young and they can be easily bent and styled. If the roots are restricted in a pot, and the leaves frequently pruned they can be reduced in size quite a lot, making it easy to achieve the ? miniature? look. They are suitable for just about every style imaginable.

Figs are very robust, and can be worked on almost all of the year round. They grow very well from cuttings. They are also wonderful material to practice advanced techniques like air layering and root or branch grafting on. These techniques will be covered in later issues as they are mostly for the hardcore fundis, but great fun to experiment with, and best done on easy-to-obtain-at-low-cost trees like figs.

One of the most remarkable features of figs is that numerous thin branches can be ? welded? together to form thicker cable-like branches. This enables us to make a tree look old and weathered in almost no time at all (from a bonsai time frame). Think of the huge Sycamore figs of India, those sweeping buttress roots and the convoluted trunks swathed in air roots like Spanish moss. This you can create in miniature in your own back garden! Sycamore figs are indigenous and make superb bonsai.

If you do not yet have any figs in your collection then go out and get some. Nurseries have them, your neighbor might have a big tree in his garden, take some cuttings. Hey, you might even have one growing like a weed in your driveway. If it is one of the smaller leafed varieties then it will probably make a great bonsai.

Ficus natalensis (Natal Fig) is probably the most commonly used. It has medium sized leaves but they reduce well. The exact species might vary from region to region but as mentioned before, as long as the tree does not have leaves the size of rugby balls eg. The Broad-leafed fig or Swamp fig, then it should make a very presentable bonsai, with a bit of attention of course.

Here are a couple of interesting but totally useless facts about figs. What we call the fruit of a fig tree, is not actually a fruit, but a receptacle called a syconia, which holds both male and female flowers. Female wasps enter through a small opening in the front of the syconia and lay eggs. The young wasps hatch and emerge from the syconia carrying pollen from the male flowers of one fig tree to the female flowers in the syconia of another. This is the only way that fig trees reproduce naturally.

Most interesting is that research has shown that each species of Ficus has a specific wasp species, and conversely each wasp species will only fertilize its specific Ficus species. Both tree and insect species are totally dependent of the other.

In the next issue I will look at the technique of welding fig branches together as mentioned above. In practice, February is the hottest time of the year and about all one can do with our trees is to ensure they get sufficient water. Any serious pruning and potting is not advised. In the meantime keep your eyes peeled for any suitable Ficus trees and begin collecting.