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Yamadori – the do's and don'ts of collecting bonsai – part 1

I recently received a slightly distressing email from a gentleman new to bonsai, new but enthusiastic, and I decided to tackle an area of bonsai that in my mind borders on taboo, Yamadori, bonsai collected from the wild.

Some of the best bonsai material is not found in nurseries but in the bush, and many if not all bonsai enthusiasts at one point or other will be confronted with the challenge of converting a shrub dug out of the wild into a bonsai masterpiece. Many, like the man in question grab a spade and charge off into the great outdoors intent on digging up anything and everything that might, at some point, make a nice tree in a pot. Bad move! In the case in point the gentleman dug out some nice looking acacias from his friend's farm but was a bit alarmed to see that there was just one long taproot. His question was "How do I create fine root hairs for these acacia?" My answer is below.

"Dear bonsai enthusiast, unfortunately there is very little positive that I can say in reply to your question, but I hope my answers don't put you off bonsai completely. That doesn't sound too good does it? Well, digging up acacias is actually not very good either. In fact, it is well known amongst the bonsai fundis to be a complete no-no. The reason is simply, as you very clearly pointed out, acacias have very long tap roots and very little else. They all do. It is because they generally live in sandy soil that is poor in nutrients and the long root gets deep down to find food, and also to anchor the plant.

It is very difficult for even the most experienced bonsai hunter to get an acacia to survive after being dug out of the bush. The survival rate is very low if not 0. It is for this reason that good, large acacia bonsai are VERY rare. Acacia are not very strong growers, and they don't just develop fine root hairs after the taproot has been removed like most other trees. Even acacia grown from seed can be reluctant to grow well, and I loose at least one acacia every winter. They sometimes just don't seem to wake up come springtime.

So, unfortunately, your enthusiasm has probably resulted in the death of the trees you have dug up. But, it would also be foolish to just neglect them because of this. All bonsai guys take on impossible challenges, and my challenge to you is to try and keep these trees growing and if at all possible, to make something of them.

So, to the actual answer to your question, you should plant them in deep flower pots or plastic basins, of appropriate size (with enough space for some roots to develop), in soil that is largely made up of COARSE river sand or granite chips. You must wash the sand very well to get out any silt or impurities. You can mix in a bit of compost and normal potting soil, but at least half should be the river sand. Before you plant, cut off just the last quarter of the taproot. This should stimulate the root hairs to develop at least a bit. Next season you will re-pot the plant and remove another chunk of tap-root, slowly reducing the root to a manageable length. Don't press the soil down too hard because this forces the new air out of the soil and also prevents air from circulating.

After re-potting the soil should be muddied. This is achieved simply by flooding the pot with water repeatedly for a short period. This moves the soil around in between the roots allowing it to get to areas out of reach of ones fingers or prodding tools like chopsticks. You must put the newly potted plants in as dark an area as possible, protected from the wind, for two weeks to promote shoots to grow. Keep the soil moist but not too wet because if it is too wet there will be no reason for the tree to develop new roots and the existing roots will rot.