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Compression

Compression is a fundamental concept that all bonsai artists attempt to achieve even though many, even the more experienced, may not be aware of it. Compression involves reducing the upwards growth or growth in length, increasing side-wards growth or growth in width.

The dilemma that we are confronted with almost every time we begin a “new” bonsai is that one starts with a stick that has a promise of shape but little else. Over a period of months or years we prepare this potensai (a plant that has potential to become a bonsai) using a variety of techniques to reduce the height of the tree in comparison to its width. It is largely this relationship between the height of the tree and the width of the trunk that determines the impression of age. In simple terms, an old tree has a wide base to the trunk (nebari) which tapers quite abruptly and if we are lucky should resemble the Eiffel Tower in Paris in shape. Of course this is a generalization because each and every tree has its own character and shape which we must enhance. A young tree is generally taller and more slender with a narrower trunk and upward growing branches, while the lower branches of an old tree will grow horizontally or even down toward the ground.

Study any branch on your tree carefully. You will most likely see faint rings circling the branches with spaces between. The ring is called a node and is the place where new shoots will emerge, the space between each node is called an internode. From a bonsai point of view the rings are like gold dust and the more a tree has the better a bonsai it should make simply because the more nodes it has the more chance of a new branch shooting in just the right place. A tree that has been compressed has short spaces between the nodes.

So how do we reduce internodal space? Well we certainly do not put it under a heavy weight and squash it, nor do we stunt the growth in any way. The most common and effective way to reduce the height of the tree and the length of the lateral branches is simply to prune them, but chopping them as one shapes a hedge is not the right approach. Further close study of our tree will reveal that where a thick side branch joins the trunk the nodes will be spaced quite far apart but as the branches get thinner and more delicate the nodes are packed closer together. The pruning technique simply involves removing the bulk of the branch followed by bending a smaller side branch into the position previously occupied by the larger branch. The “new” side branch is held in position with wire for a few months until it has set. The new branch may be half the length of the previous branch but the base (where it joins the trunk) has the same thickness of the previous longer branch. It has been compressed.

The method above is often referred to as “making a new leader” and can be used to reduce the height of the main trunk in the same way. As always there are a few things to be aware of. Choose your new branch carefully. Ideally it should have a good branch structure, but this is not essential because one will use the same technique repeatedly on this and all other branches and over time a good branch structure will develop anyway. It is a good practice to make the cut so that the resulting scar is at the back of the tree for obvious reasons, but this is also not always possible. Always use sharp tools and make clean cuts that will heal with as little scarring as possible. Generally this sort of pruning can be carried out all year round, BUT, larger cuts should be left till spring when the tree is growing vigorously and the branches are more flexible which will make the wire part of the operation less risky. Seal your cuts with tree sealer or white wood glue.

It will take between 2 and 3 weeks (generally) for new shoots to appear. Apart from a bit of light pruning to keep new shoots in check one should let the tree rest for a few months to