

Refining a fused *Ficus Natalensis*

About 7 or 8 years ago I fused together a number of rooted *Ficus Natalensis* cuttings. They fuse together rather quickly (usually in less than a year) since Natal figs are strangler figs. As such they adhere quite easily to almost anything- rocks, walls, houses and, of course other trees. The fused tree has a very nice trunk with decent taper and a good distribution of branches. Each branch and the upper portion of the trunk is one of the original cuttings (see Fig1).

After the initial styling, I let the tree grow for a number of years to thicken the trunk (both the upper and lower portions) and to increase the ramification. I pruned the fig regularly to maintain a reasonable silhouette and size. Constant leaf pruning resulted in a crown with leaves which were reduced in size (see Fig2). Note, however, that one no longer can clearly see the upper portion of the trunk despite the fact that it has thickened considerably. Also the ramification is masked by the abundant foliage much of which is located at the end of the branches. To take advantage of the improvements in the size of the trunk and the improved ramification, it is now necessary to remove a number of unnecessary branches. The tree has to be thinned out. This, of course, requires a critical look at the branch structure of the bonsai tree. Heavy branches near the apex as well as weaker branches emanating from the lower portion of the trunk can be eliminated provided that the remaining branches still provide an interesting silhouette. The position of the remaining branches can easily be altered by wiring. Furthermore, bonsai trees are 3 dimensional objects and care must be taken to provide for sufficient depth by leaving enough growth in the area behind the trunk. When viewing a bonsai tree from above, I personally prefer at least a 60/40 split in the back-to-front distribution of the foliage with the larger portion behind the trunk.

Fig. 3 shows this Natal fig after thinning and some wiring. No radical changes were made in the styling but many of the remaining branches were re-positioned with wire. Note the very nice taper of the whole trunk. As the aforementioned branch removal was done in the early fall, after having brought the tree into my greenhouse, I chose at this time not to attempt to make this ficus bonsai more compact by shortening some the remaining branches. Much of the foliage is located at the tips of the branches. Opening up the interior of this bonsai to increased ventilation and light will promote back-budding on the branches. Next spring this particular Natal fig will be



Figure 1: Fused Natal Fig cuttings



Figure 2: A few years later



Figure 3: After thinning and wiring

re-potted. At this time I will shorten some of the branches to make the crown more compact and asymmetrical. Regular leaf pruning throughout the next growing season should again reduce the size of the individual leaves.

After a few months the wire has been removed. No damage has been done to any of the branches. As spring is approaching the tree can be cut back some more and leaf pruned. It is still much too full for my taste. I have again selectively removed the unwanted and unnecessary branches. A few of the remaining branches have been re-wired and re-positioned. Styling a tree in this fashion allows one to consider various possibilities for the shape of the tree over a period of time rather than at one sitting (see Fig4). By thinning again the tree looks more mature and the taper in the trunk is revealed to a larger extent.

In about a month or so the serious leaf pruning will begin. In spite of the long hot summer the tree has done remarkably well. After re-potting in a shallower pot a new top was created (see Fig5) and the tree was leaf pruned regularly.

Re-potting stimulates growth, in particular it leads to an increase in the size of the leaves. Rather than let the tree grow unchecked and then prune back I have chosen to selectively remove the larger leaves often. It will take a bit more time for the foliage to fill in but final result will be worth it (see Fig6).



Figure 4: Removing the wire and thinning

The refinement process takes time and requires patience. After a few months the foliage has begun to fill in. The foliage is reasonably compact and the size of the individual leaves is still quite acceptable. As the foliage fills in the tree will no longer appear to be too tall. Should the proportions not improve the crown can be removed and the small branch on the left hand side can be used to form a new crown. Careful consideration must also be given to the possible orientation of the tree in the pot. When next re-potted the tree will be slightly rotated to take better advantage of the base of the trunk and shifted slightly to the right. Because of the re-orientation the fig was again re-wired

Another growing season has passed (see Fig7). The foliage of the fig was allowed to become denser over the summer. Selective leaf pruning has been performed to maintain the shape as well as the uniform size of the individual leaves.



Figure 5: Re-potting in a shallower pot.



Figure 6: A few months later



Figure 7: After the foliage has filled in