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Clip and Grow, the Lingnan School

The art form we call bonsai is the sum of 3000 or more years of cultural development that began in ancient China, when the spiritual philosophies of ancient Indian Buddhism were applied to gardening in general and to potted plants in particular.

Penjing, the Chinese word for bonsai is generally less formal than Japanese bonsai, and trees seldom obey the expected norms and rules of bonsai, correct branch placement, flat horizontal leaf pads etc. These rules, and the many varied styles that we are so familiar with are relatively recent Japanese additions to the vast store of bonsai knowledge, and have been established just within the last two centuries. The Japanese also introduced the technique of wrapping wire around branches in order to bend them into new positions. This method results in graceful, even sinuous branches, and enables one to produce a styled tree in very little time.

Before the use of wire became an expected technique, the primary method of shaping a tree was the 'clip and grow' method. As the term suggests, the technique is based on selective pruning. We actually employ this method whenever we prune or trim a tree, but if one carries out the procedure with more awareness of the way the tree responds to the clipping, stunning results can be achieved. Trees grown by the clip and grow technique generally display dramatic directional changes, the sharp angles adding to the gnarled and weathered appearance. The technique became known as the Lingnan technique and proponents of this technique belonged to the Lingnan School. Interestingly, this 'new' philosophy, a combination of Indian Buddhism and Daoism (Taoism) the native Chinese religion was exported to Japan in the 13th century and was called Zen.

The technique is actually very simple to describe. A branch or shoot is pruned to between 2 and 4 nodes away from its base. A node is basically any point where a branch or leaf is attached. The space between each node is called an inter-node. Once the terminal bud (the growing tip) has been removed, the nutrients that were being consumed by the terminal bud will back up and cause the lateral buds in the nodes to shoot. The direction in which the new shoots grow is not random, they are governed by the position of the nodes, and the new shoots will always initially grow in the direction in which the node points. So, simply clipping your branch so that the outermost node points in the direction you desire a new shoot to grow is the trick.

The same principle is applied to the next generation of shoots. As a new shoot develops, the first set of leaves is always the smallest, the next set are slightly bigger. At about the fourth set the leaves will have reached maximum size. Remove the outer two sets leaving the smaller leaves. Also remove any new shoots that are growing incorrectly. In the Lingnan technique each of the small branches is treated as a separate tree, and each is trained in its desired shape or direction by well-considered pruning.

The drawback with the clip and grow method is that it takes time, a lot of it. It may take 10 years to produce a good tree using this method. With wire one can produce a lovely tree in an afternoon, however the Lingnan tree will generally be superior in many respects.

Most bonsai artists use a combination of both, and modern growers have invented many more techniques and tricks of our own, and pretty much anything goes, as long as the result evokes an emotional response in the viewer. We may use wire to bend a main branch into position, and use the Lingnan technique to shape the lateral branches and leaf pads.

The clip and grow technique is mostly used on deciduous trees, vigorous growers that have the ability to bud profusely especially on old wood i.e. the trunk. Make your cuts at the back of the branch whenever possible to reduce visual scars. One can speed up the entire growing process by defoliating your trees once or twice during summer, but this must only be done on healthy trees. The Lingnan technique is particularly useful when working with thorny material like acacias, and is the only way to produce flattop styles.

To finish off, a last word about style. The Japanese styles of bonsai echo their fascination with order and proportion, and Japanese bonsai seem to be judged according to how closely they adhere to a prescribed set of rules. The challenge is in manipulating natural materials to do man's bidding. The Chinese approach (zen and now), is to enhance the natural tendencies of each particular species and individual tree. The tree is still manipulated, shaped and trained, it is just that the mental approach to the styling has a slightly different source of motivation. Some trees suit a Japanese approach and others a Chinese one. The choice is yours.