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Commiphora harveyi

Commiphora harveyi, or Paper Bark as it is more often called, is a favorite bonsai species amongst bonsai enthusiasts in South Africa. It occurs naturally throughout KwaZulu Natal and the eastern side of our country including the Kruger Park, but many growers on the Reef and the drier areas of our country also work with this species extensively. Some growers consider this species almost impossible to kill and as a result it is sometimes called the Kan-nie-dood-nie in Afrikaans. Branches of the *Commiphora* are often used as fencing around villages in Zululand. These branches have a tendency to sprout roots and shoots after a good rainfall justifying the Afrikaans name. This ability to form roots and shoots seemingly at the drop of the gardener's headgear makes it a very good subject for bonsai for obvious reasons.

It is a vigorous grower, but be warned, this tree can be killed. Quite easily actually, and strangely enough they are killed more from love than neglect. Over-watering in winter is probably the biggest cause of death with this species. They have very soft wood and if it receives too much water in the dry months, or if the soil has poor drainage the tree can quite easily rot. Its natural habitat is the slopes and valleys of KZN where it grows in fairly shallow soil and receives moderate but regular rainfall. It does not put out a deep taproot but develops a good network of smaller roots and can be planted in quite shallow pots.

From a bonsai point of view, another very desirable feature of this species is its ability to heal from quite drastic surgery. Not only do the scars of a cut close over very quickly, the bark grows remarkably quickly as well, and it takes just a couple of years for it to cover all but the largest of scars, and even these will disappear before too long. The bark is actually one of the attractive features of *Commiphora*. The outer surface dries and forms flakes much like the pages of an old book. These peel off from time to time revealing a shiny bright green cambium which, when exposed to light, grows and swells and eventually forms new papery bark. Insects can build nests under the bark and sometimes it is necessary to peel off the piece by hand but otherwise it is best to let the bark flake off at its natural pace.

The leaves are shaped a bit like an oak or maple leaf and they reduce down in size very well. The tree sheds its leaves twice a year normally, the leaves turning yellow before falling off. This is a good thing and if some of the yellow leaves remain hanging on the tree remove them by pulling them off by hand. As the new shoots appear prune the ones you don't want and pinch the ends of the ones you do want. The new leaves are a beautiful bronze colour and will be smaller and more numerous.

As if all the features above are not enough, the *Commiphora* has one more ? bonus? for us. The cut branches and nipped buds exude a wonderful fragrance that soon fills the room and lingers long. The scent remains on the fingers, and actually I can't walk past one of my *Commiphora* without gently squashing a leaf just to experience that aroma once again.

Lastly, the *Commiphora* is related to the genus of trees *Boswellia* from which frankincense, the stuff the Wise Men gave to Jesus, is made.