



Friends, Creativity

An Interview with Massimo Bandera, Italy, on

By Joe Grande, Canada

Top row; Drawing showing the potential for the design of this *Taxus cuspidata*, that features its magnificent deadwood.

Massimo being assisted by Antonio Jesús and observed by Gigi, co-owner of the tree.

Massimo estimates the age of this tree to be around 500 years.

Bottom left and right; Front and back views of the tree before styling work.

Although many recognize nine species of yews, all yews are closely related to the generic *Taxus baccata*. One of its distinctive features is that all parts of the yew, but the berries, are toxic to humans and animals. However, the seeds are as poisonous as the rest of the tree. The yew's bark is used to create an effective cancer-fighting drug which has led to the overharvesting of this unique organism that can live more than a thousand years. It is listed among 400 species of plants at risk of extinction because of their medicinal value. The yew's importance to humans is epic. Before the invention of gunpowder, its strength and hardness made the yew as valuable as steel when it came to making instruments for war, defense and hunting. Parishes in medieval England were required to grow yews, contained within fenced churchyards because of their toxic properties, to provide material for making long bows. Stiff and strong, the yew is the time-honored wood for making bows. Its springy sapwood made the iconic English long bow a powerful weapon that guaranteed military supremacy in the middle ages. Even the Chalcolithic mummy, a well-preserved natural mummy of a man who lived around 3,300 BCE, found in 1991 in the Italian alps, carried an unfinished bow





& a Mighty Yew

his recent work on a yew called il Nettuno

made of yew wood. In North America, indigenous people made strong and long-lasting canoe paddles from the mighty yew.

The yew in this article is a *Taxus cuspidata*, Japanese yew or spreading yew, native to Japan, Korea, northeast China and the extreme southeast of Russia. Individual trees from Sikhote-Alin, a mountain range in Russia that is home to brown bears, reindeer and Siberian tigers, are known to be 1,000 years old.

BCI Director and noted bonsai artist and teacher Massimo Bandera recently worked on a yew, and had to bend a heavy branch to realize the tree's full aesthetic

potential. After he sent me the photos showing the work on this exceptional specimen, I interviewed him by e-mail. Here is our conversation about this singular bonsai tree which he calls il Nettuno (Neptune).

What is this tree's story? How long have you cultivated it?

For some time I followed the collection of a dear friend, the collector Antonio Villena della Spagna. In 2011 told me about an old *Taxus* he was thinking of acquiring. The trunk shows an incredible age which I estimate between 500 and 600 years. After Antonio purchased it, I cultivated the tree for three years.

Top row; Massimo applies a lime sulphur solution to the deadwood.

Example of treated deadwood in the crown of the tree.

Calm and composed, Antonio and Gigi's pet dog Haiko helped set the mood for this creative afternoon that was made warmer with friendship.

Bottom left; The branch that will be hollowed out and bent to lessen its angle.

Bottom right; Reducing the girth of a branch to create better taper by stripping fibres in the direction of the veins to create more natural-looking deadwood.



Top; A powerful grinder and a carbide tip at 27000 rpm efficiently carves the hard deadwood.

Middle left and right; The branch to be bent has been hollowed out, creating a hole and thus weakening the branch so it can be bent.

Bottom left; The subject branch is carefully wrapped with wet raffia to protect the live bark during the bending process.

Bottom left; With the branch protected with raffia, it is now ready to be wrapped with thick copper wires.



What role did Antonio Villena della Spagna play in this project?

He and his wife Gigi gave me the honor of styling this tree. Sometimes even in bonsai art, a person who plays the role of patron of the arts is very important because it provides an opportunity for authors to create many works. Also this bonsai is an example of collaboration and cooperation. With the help of my students Antonio Jesús, and Pedro Gracia, I was able to achieve a better outcome. In the pictures you can feel the climate of understanding and vivacity that has



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been created among the people who attended, dogs included. Their names are Haiko and Takumi. Antonio and his wife Gigi have been able to create ideal conditions in which the we were able to express ourselves to the maximum.

Is it necessary to have an assistant for this work?

Of course it is! Not only does it take an assistant because alone it is difficult to have enough strength, but it also takes a good understanding between people. Antonio Jesús is a student of mine with whom I have a great artistic rapport, comparable to the best Japanese tradition.

What are the characteristics of the *Taxus* species that make it good material for bonsai and how does this tree compare to this ideal?

The yew along with juniper are the two really sculptural conifers of the bonsai world, with their unique aesthetic and their artistic potential: the simple and dynamic movement of the juniper, the strong and austere yew, as is shown by this specimen. Il Nettuno also has a fantastic group of natural Jin that create an impressive sculptural effect evocative of the trident associated with Neptune, god of the sea.

Are there any aspects of a yew that make it difficult to grow as bonsai?

I would say no, it is a species that lives thousands of years in nature and is very resistant to everything!

What made you decide it was time to work on this tree now?

I realized that the tree had sufficient vigor when I saw that the annual growth was 20 cm long, a lot for a yew confined to a pot, then I gave it a special plant-based nutrition program.

Do you consider this heavy branch bending technique routine or is it to be used when there are no other options for the design of the tree?

This bending technique is certainly not easy, but if done correctly on vigorous specimens, it is a safe option to be applied if it is really necessary in terms of aesthetics.

What is the best season for this work?

Heavy branch bending can be carried out from November to April.

How do you prepare for this work? Which tools and materials do you use?

I always have all the possible tools, even for collecting yamadori ... I have an adoration for the tools of the noble arts, even as objects, and I collect everything, both hand tools and electrical tools. In this case I used a powerful grinder with tungsten carbide saw blades, among my favorite tools.

Tell us about the electric grinder and the special bit that you use for hollowing out the branch.

I used a powerful grinder and a carbide tip at 27000 rpm. The important thing is to reach at least 22 thousand, but when I carve deadwood on a bonsai usually work with a 34000 rpm machine.



Top; It takes considerable strength to bend the branch into the desired position.

Middle; A guy wire is used to keep the branch in the desired position. The tree is now ready for more detailed wiring.

Bottom; Detail of the heavy copper wires.



I see in this case, you chose to create a hole in the branch instead of a deep groove, usually reinforced with a spline of thick wire.

It is an invention of mine for very hard woods such as yew and olive. In this case, the branch to be bent was very thick, Yew wood is very hard and stiff, and the deadwood adds to its strength. I opted for my master's technique which is to clear wood from the interior part of the branch. Masahiko Kimura taught me this technique, which for me is unsurpassed, but I also made an oval hole that reduces and weakens the fiber even more.

What measures do you take to protect the live portion of the branch?

The bark and deadwood is first treated with propolis to help with dehydration. Then I wrap raffia around and through the branch and apply thick, 5 mm copper wire around the branch. I use natural raffia and not synthetic tape, so the bark can continue to exchange gasses with the environment.

What is propolis and how is it applied?

Propolis or bee glue, is a resin made by bees with antibiotic insecticide and fungicide activity used as a sealant. It helps prevent dehydration of the live branch.

Propolis is brushed on to the bark and deadwood creating a natural second skin for the tree. Raffia is then applied as usual. Propolis is not known in Japan but in Europe it was once used as a filler, mixed with wax for tree surgery on monumental trees. It was expensive so it fell into disuse with the advent of chemistry; Now it is coming back due to the organic movement. For me it is very valid and we use it a lot in Italy.

Why is raffia necessary and is it the best material for this technique?

The raffia adheres tightly to the bark but allows it to breathe. It also protects the bark from damage by allowing the wire spirals to slide during the bending.

After the branch is protected with raffia and you are ready to bend the branch, what are your thinking about as you perform the bend?

I prefer to bend by hand. In this way I "feel" the bend and realize how far I can go. It's a feeling... and I'm not afraid because I have never had a branch break with this technique.

With a lever and the help of my assistants, I forcefully bent the branch until it is in the desired position. The technique allows bends otherwise impossible for such a large, thick branch and distributes the forces evenly so as not to break, preventing the loss of the branch. It is a difficult task that pushes the limit of possibilities, therefore it should be performed only on very vigorous specimens.

Do you try to bend the branch all at once? Are there times when a branch is bent a little at a time?

Some do it a little at a time, but I think it's better to bend all at once. I believe bending a little at a time is too stressful for the plant.



Top and Middle; The detailed wiring proceeds until all the branches and sub branches are wired and positioned.

Lower Middle; This container was chosen for il Nettuno.

Bottom; The proud collectors, Antonio Villena della Spagna, wife Gigi and the newly potted il Nettuno.



How much deadwood do you remove to make the branch easy to bend? How do you know it is enough to bend the branch?

Difficult to answer because it is very variable. I would say in general two-thirds needs to be removed, but by bending and feeling the tension, I discern if it is sufficient.



The finished tree viewed from the front and back. The bent branch is now in harmony with the composition of the tree that will be allowed to grow in full vigor after this invasive styling session.

What is the aftercare for a tree after a heavy branch has been bent?

For me it is essential the cultivation comes before the technique, vigor before stress. It's a bit like an athlete before her race, who comes very well prepared so as not to get injured during the race! My bonsai are allowed to grow in full vigor at least 4 to 5 years after these invasive styling sessions.

How long does it take for Taxus branches to set before the wire can be removed?

After a year I take off all the wires. For the Taxus it is sufficient to first carry out one major wiring, after which only minor adjustments, wiring only what is strictly necessary.

Do you have any practical advice for bonsaists who wish to master this technique? What is the best way to practice?

For me, bonsai cannot be self-taught, it is too complex and long, the choice of a good teacher is actually the best way to learn this ancient art correctly, a wonderful experience that I recommend to everyone. 🌲

