



Zelkova Project

NEBARI BONSAI 盆栽

This is a project I've been working on since '06 and it's at about the halfway point. This is a Zelkova that belonged to a friend, given to him from another friend, who styled it with Ben Oki in the 80s or 90s. Neither of them were satisfied with how the tree looked, but since it had been a bonsai for a long time, it became difficult to do the work that needed to be done: chop everything that "didn't work" and start over.

In March of '06, my buddy decided he'd had enough of the tree, and gave it to me to do whatever I wanted to it, but he would always have first right of refusal if I ever wanted to get rid of it. I also bet him that I would have it ready to show in 5 years.

Here is the material. The trunk is 3" in diameter at the widest point. At the time, it was about 36" tall, but styled into a slant.



Various sides of the initial material



Future Back



Future Right



Future Front

The Issues

The problems with the tree included:

1. It's an old tree, and not very strong. Parts of the trunk were no longer alive.
2. It was tall, lanky, and styled in an awkward slant; not becoming to a Zelkova.
3. Lots of dead areas in the trunk.
4. Bad nebari, and a small, weak root system.

Positive notes:

1. Great bark.
2. Mature trunk.
3. It could likely be reinvigorated.

Step 1...go all-in

The trunk was chopped back to about 18", and at the time, notched it into a "V", hoping I could start with a broom style.

Then, we removed most of the roots and left it with a base that could be developed.





New Front



Step 2...let it grow

It recovered, but very slowly.
Here is how it looked in June '06.

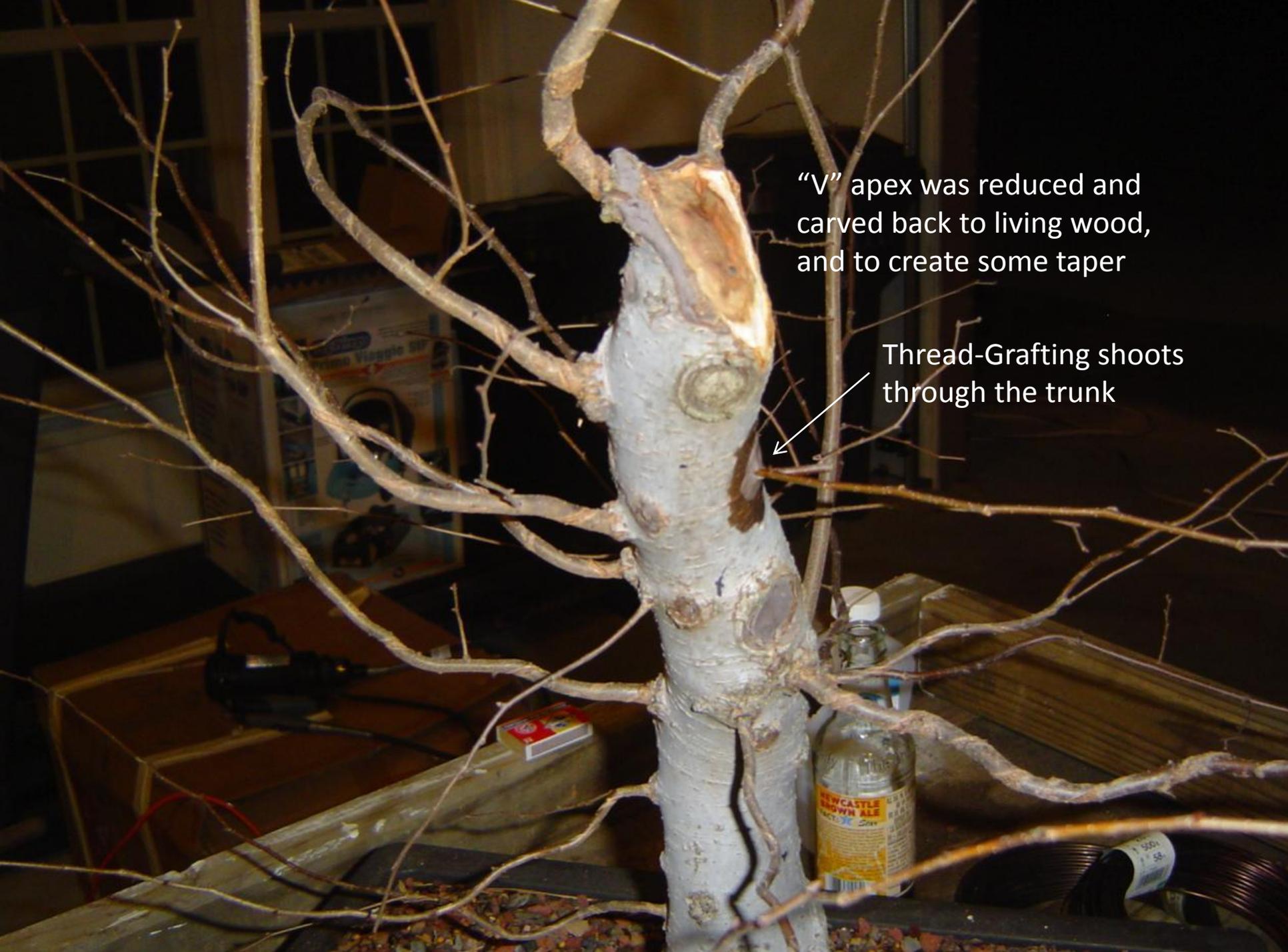


Nothing is
budding in this
area...a problem

2 years later...

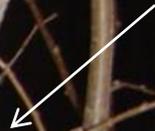
It became apparent where parts of the trunk were dead, and would not sprout new growth. This was going to be a problem, and I learned 3 things:

1. I don't have a gift for grafting
2. Grafts aren't likely to take on dead wood
3. Dead portions of Zelkova trunks are pinkish-orange when wet...which is good to know.



“V” apex was reduced and carved back to living wood, and to create some taper

Thread-Grafting shoots through the trunk





3 shoots were thread-grafted through the trunk in an attempt to add branches to the right side.

Step 2 (still)...let it grow

It was placed out on the bench and allowed to grow for the year.





It grew to 48" wide, and all thread grafts grew leaves;
but did not fuse with the cambium at the trunk.

At the end of 2007 growing season. Some of the larger branches were reduced. The thread grafts remained.





Fall 2009. Thread Grafts still attached, but not taking.

Fall 2009

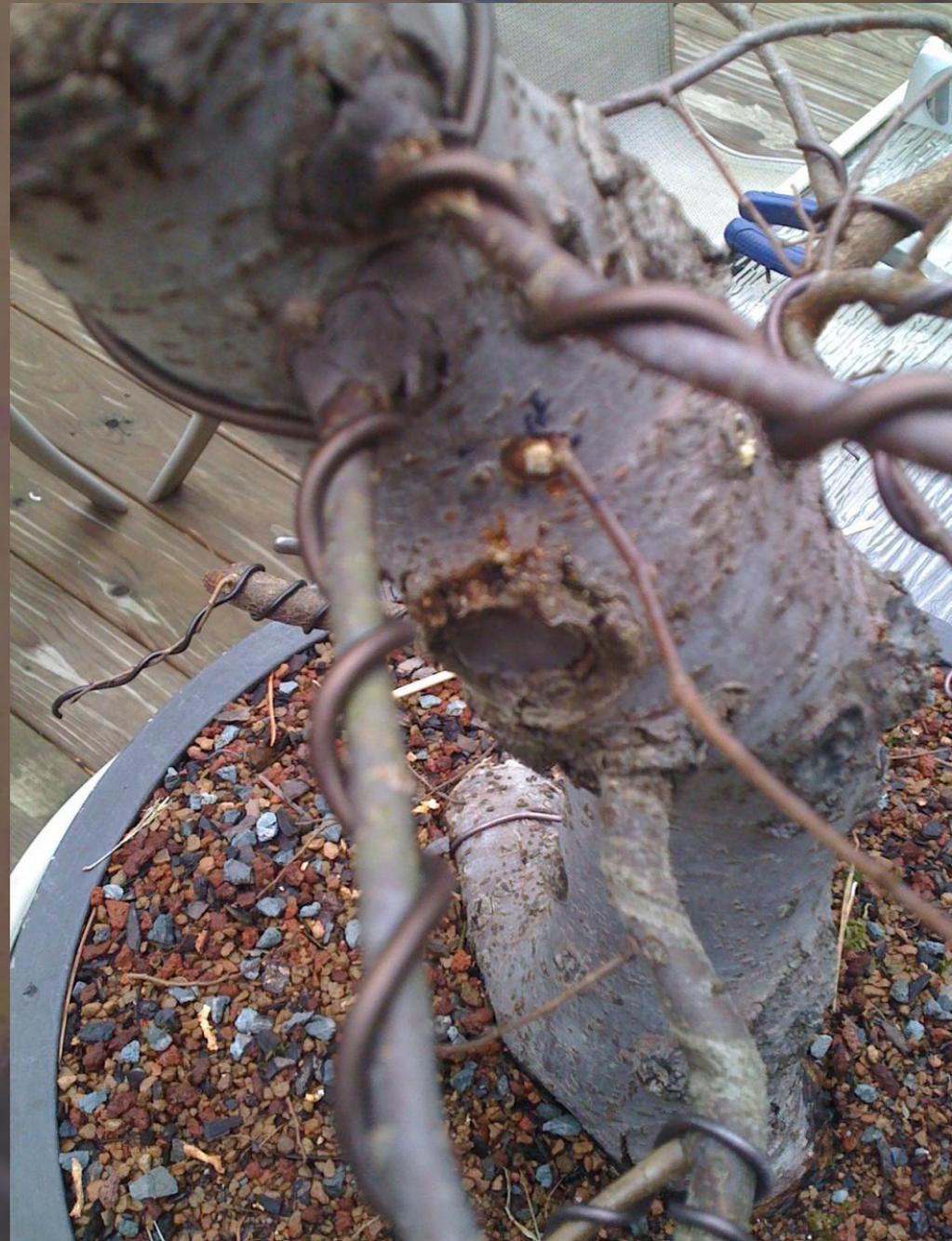


One last shot at grafting

In 2010, I made one last attempt to thread-graft a branch through the trunk, trying to hit living tissue on the right side.

1. Mark and drill a hole
2. Mark contact points, reveal cambiums and insert scion through hole, ensure cambiums connect.
3. Use a small piece of branch to wedge the scion in place to keep cambiums in contact. (photo 1)
4. Put cut paste to keep the contacts from drying
5. Secure the scion with raffia to prevent it from moving (photo 2)
6. Wrap the whole thing in grafting tape (photos 3, 4, 5)

Note, the wired branches with cut paste at the base are the '08 graft attempts, not yet separated, but would be removed in summer '10.





Drill hole and thread shoot through the trunk, expose cambiums on branch and trunk, then secure with raffia



Wrap everything with grafting tape to secure



The scion secured.



Pinch, Pinch, Pinch

For the 2010 growing season, the Zelkova was pinched constantly, every time a shoot appeared with 5 leaves, it was cut back to 2 leaves. The goal was to develop enough material to prune and wire over the winter.

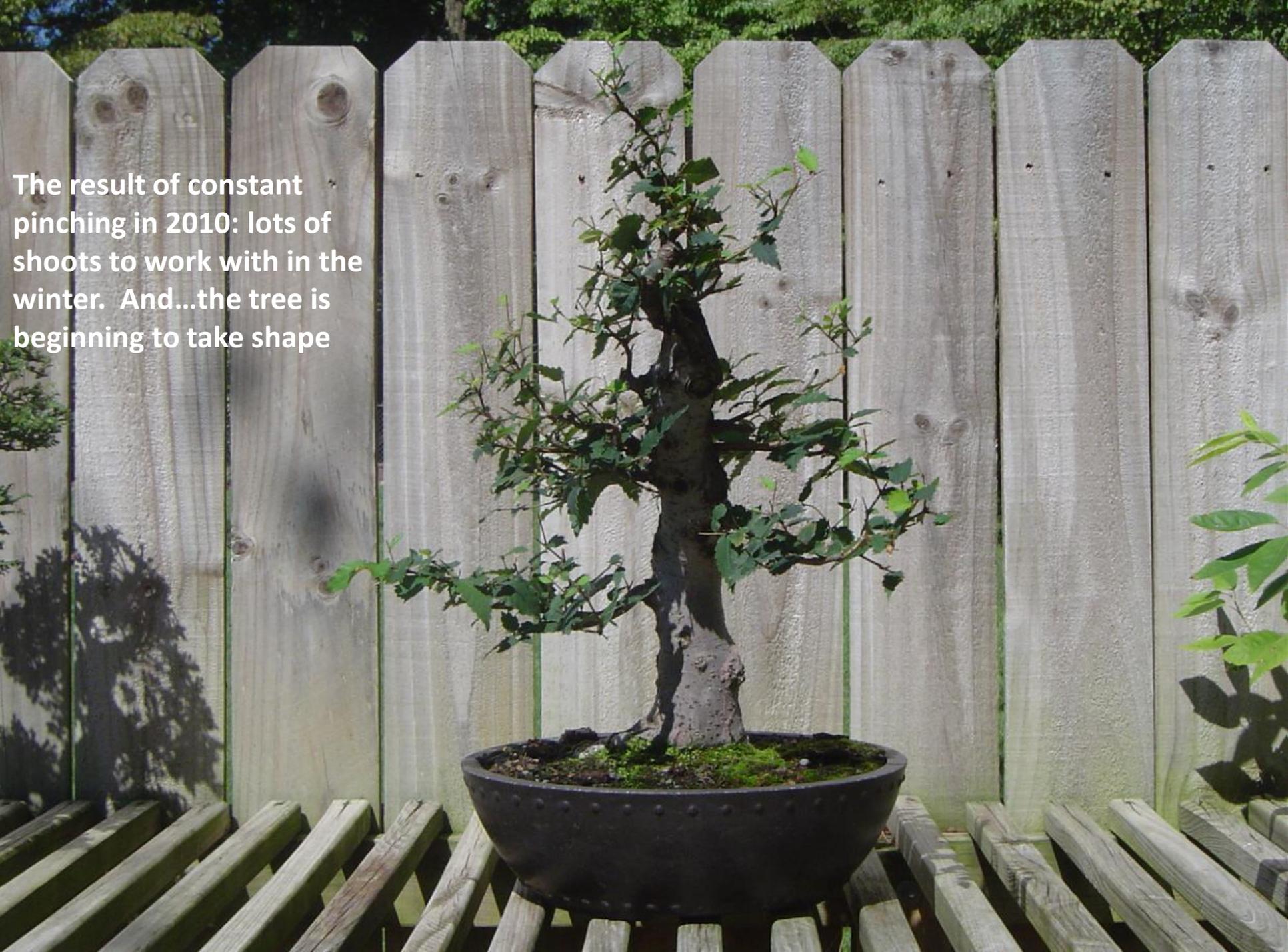
The amazing thing this year was that the more I pinched it, the more it grew. The vigor this year was crazy. It seemed that each time I went outside I would find new shoots. Unfortunately, nothing new appeared on the right side of the trunk.

Here are shots from May '10 and August '10. Very little wiring since '07, but it's actually starting to take some shape.

The graft is still attached, and I started to wound the stock to "wean" the scion, and it seems to be alive, but I can't tell if the cambiums are fused yet. I'm leaving it alone for another year.



The result of constant pinching in 2010: lots of shoots to work with in the winter. And...the tree is beginning to take shape



"First" complete wiring

In December, most every shoot on the tree was pruned and wired. The grafted branch is still unwired, so it's a little awkward, but the tree is starting to take shape. Next year, it will be repotted, and then the name of the game will be pinching!

It still has very few branches on the right side, and maybe growing it all year with the right side facing South will help. If it doesn't improve, it can be reduced to about 12" tall, turned 180 degrees and utilizing a great back branch, create a new leader. I'm not ready to commit to that idea yet, but the option is still available...



3rd Transplanting from beginning of major work



Reducing heavy downward-facing root



Heavy bottom root removed with thin, sharp saw. This allows the tree to be placed flat in a shallower pot.

Roots are starting to emerge radially



Reduce root mass

Notice how majority of roots are emerging from left side. Compare this to the relative strength of the left side of the tree in 2011 growing season images. Future work will include cutting left roots harder, leaving right roots longer to balance out the top.



Settled into a new, shallower pot





Branches from behind are pulled around to side to fill void.

Grafted branch on the right did not take



5/29/11

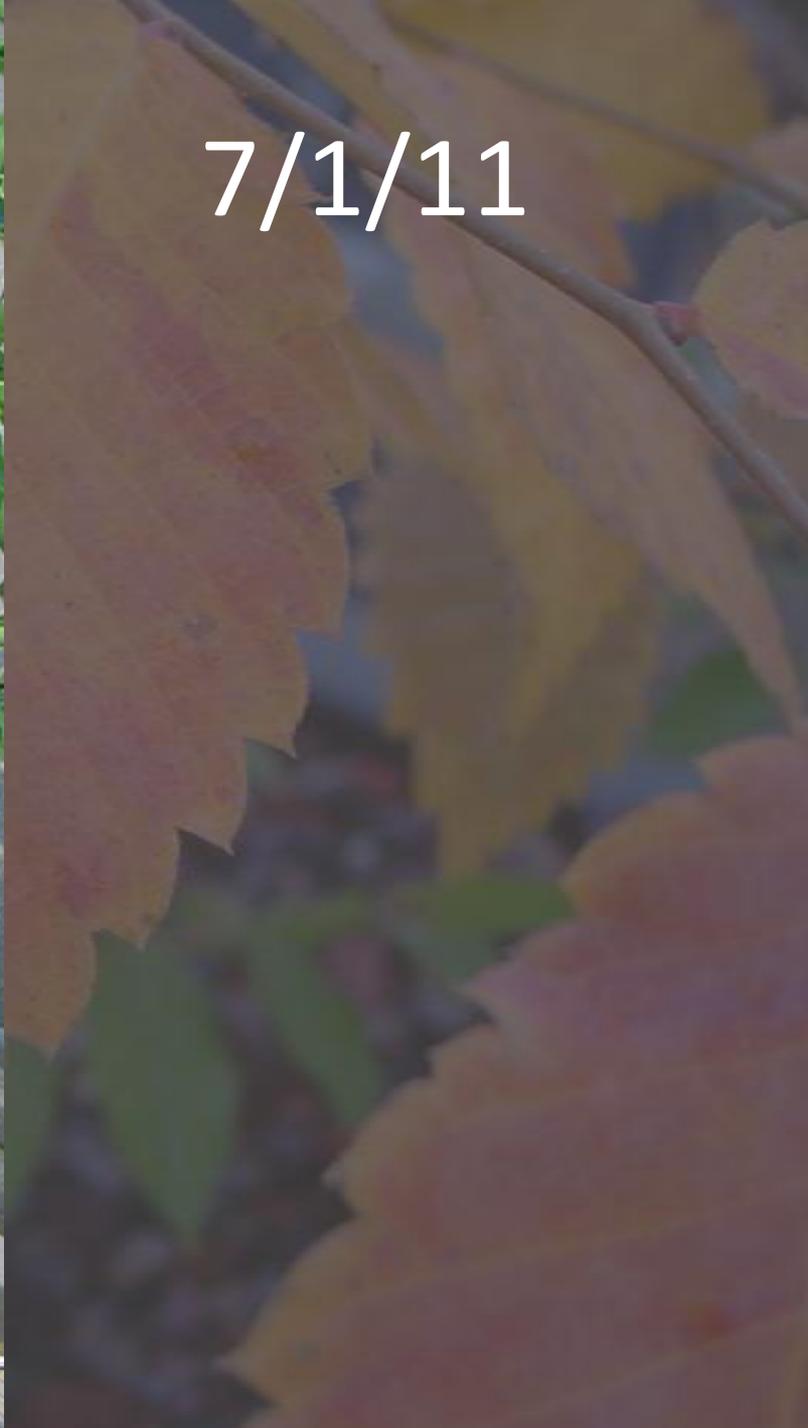


Defoliated, Unwired, Pruned 6/12





7/1/11



Defoliated again 7/14, pruned

