

THE CULTURE & TRAINING OF DWARF BRUSH CHERRY BONSAI

By William N. Valavanis

Training and teaching bonsai has been an enjoyable and satisfying challenge for me. Throughout my quest for excellence in bonsai for over forty years, I have maintained only one "indoor" (non winter hardy species in my area) bonsai a Dwarf brush cherry.

When most people begin to grow bonsai they want to enjoy their specimens close up and indoors too. When I began to study bonsai as an eleven year old youngster, I was not interested in keeping specimens indoors. As my bonsai interest progressed keeping a few bonsai indoors seemed interesting.

I soon learned that it was more difficult to maintain bonsai indoors than outdoors. Also I discovered that even though non winter hardy bonsai are placed outdoors for the warm

weather they never really seem to be as vigorous as specimens grown outdoors where they are hardy in subtropical or tropical regions.

For twenty long and cold seasons in Upstate New York, this Dwarf brush cherry lived in a bright east facing window of my mother's family room, not in a greenhouse. It was grown outside during the summer.

Dwarf Brush Cherry

The Brush cherry, *Eugenia myrtifolia*, has been the subject of several botanical reclassifications. Some authorities now classify this plant as *Syzygium paniculatum*. The Brush cherry is a large group of plants, many native to Australia and warmer regions of the world.

The long dark green leaves are approximately three inches in length

very glossy and thick. The new growth is tinged with red and is very colorful.

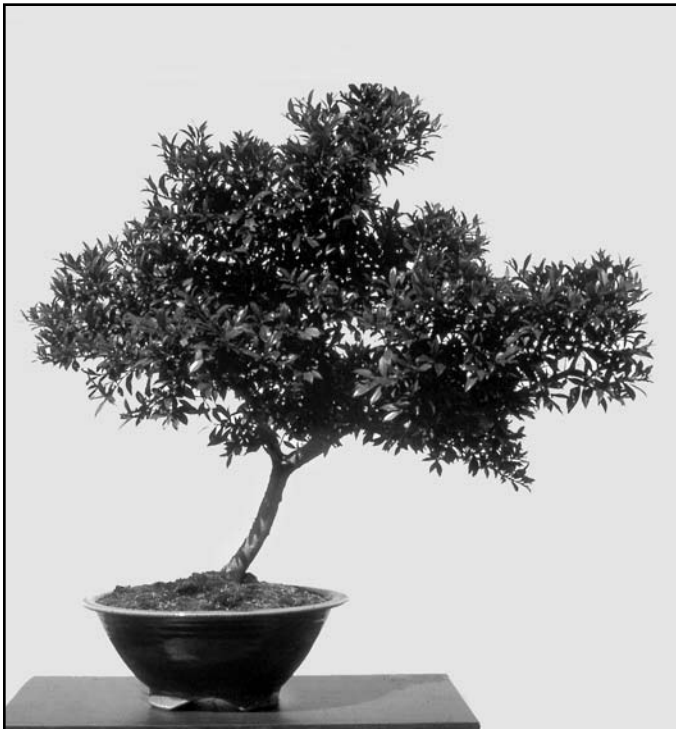
Flowers of Dwarf brush cherry are approximately one-half to one inch in size and are bright white and fuzzy. They are very similar to Common myrtle, *Myrtus communis*, which is not surprising because both of these plants are in the *Myrtaceae* family. Plump rose purple fruit are often produced which are less than one inch in length. Some species of *Eugenia* produce fruit which are edible and used for jelly.

The Dwarf brush cherry most commonly trained for bonsai is the dwarf cultivar 'Compacta'. Another Brush cherry cultivar often used for bonsai is 'Teenie Genie', but this cultivar is very dwarf and a bit more difficult to cultivate than 'Compacta'.

The Dwarf brush cherry is

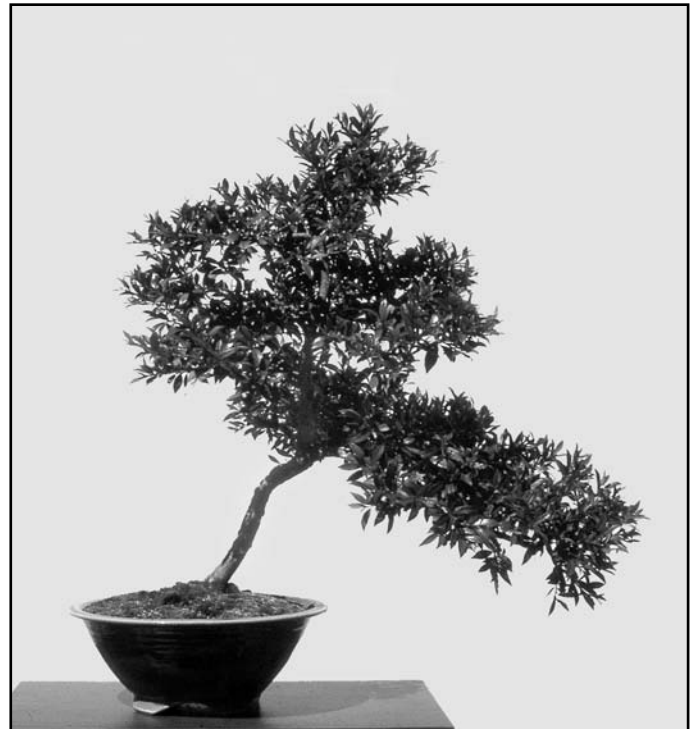
August 1977—

Dwarf brush cherry before removing heavy left branch.



August 1977—

After pruning left branch and lowering right branch.



WM. N. VALAVANIS PHOTOS

commonly grown as an ornamental shrub in California, Florida and warm regions of the world. It is used for hedging and primarily for topiary specimens because it is vigorous and can withstand continued pinching and shearing.

Culture And Care

The Dwarf brush cherry can be easily propagated by soft wood cuttings taken during the summer growing season. Seed is also another way to obtain new specimens. Simply remove the pulp from the seed and sow. One of the seedlings I grew from my original plant was taller than the parent and was created into a bonsai as well. Vigorous branches with interesting shapes can be easily airlayered during the summer.

I keep my Dwarf brush cherry in a cold greenhouse with the lowest temperature about 50°F. In areas where it is cultivated outdoors the temperatures may reach 30°F, but this is rare and should be avoided to prevent foliage damage. When kept inside a home a cooler rather than warmer temperature is recommended.

Provide as much light as possible and supplemental light may be necessary in dark areas. When brought indoors for the winter expect some leaf drop from the inner portions of the bonsai due to decreased light. When the danger of frost has past, place the bonsai outdoors in full sun exposure to maintain the compact foliage. Specimens kept in shade do not display the red tinged new growth and tend to grow more loose than compact.

There are no specific pests or diseases which attack Dwarf brush cherry. An occasional infestation of scales or mealy bugs can be easily remedied by appropriate pesticides.

Repot Dwarf brush cherry bonsai every three or four years if the specimen is established and being maintained. Young developing plants will benefit from transplanting every year or two. The roots are fibrous and can be easily pruned to fit bonsai containers. A common mix of bonsai soil is used since this species is not fussy about soil composition. However, it should be screened to eliminate fine soil particles.

Well developed bonsai specimens will require plenty of water during the hot summer months, especially when kept in full sun

exposure. My large specimen requires watering twice a day during the summer, especially if it is windy. Remember to water thoroughly until water comes out of the drainage hole of the container. Younger undeveloped specimens in large training pots will not require watering as often. If fast vigorous growth is desired for Dwarf brush cherry bonsai, a high nitrogen content fertilizer must be used once a week. Developed bonsai being maintained should not be fertilized as often.

Pruning And Wiring

The Dwarf brush cherry is a broadleaf evergreen species like Satsuki azalea and can withstand drastic pruning at the correct time of year. Mid-spring, as the new growth begins, is a safe time to drastic prune for basic shape. All the foliage can be safely removed to establish trunk line and to encourage vigorous vegetative growth which will develop into new branches. I prefer to drastic prune when specimens are taken outside for the warm weather.

Bonsai which are developed should be trimmed whenever new shoots reach two to three inches in length. Do not trim as often if specimens are being developed and thicker trunks or branches are desired. Be careful when pruning the new shoots, cut the stem, not the leaves.

Although specimens can be wired anytime of the year, I prefer to wire Dwarf brush cherry bonsai during the summer season. If wired in June or July, most specimens can have their wire removed in autumn.

Wired specimens should be carefully watched, especially in the upper regions of the plant where it grows very fast and wire can easily cut into the bark. The dense dark foliage often hides the wire and must be carefully watched.

Background For Featured Specimen

I started this Dwarf brush cherry from a cutting rooted in 1969 while at college in Farmingdale, New York. It has been completely container grown. In 1976 the bonsai was used for a demonstration when I returned back to college to teach a bonsai course.

At that time it was growing in a plastic training pot. During the demonstration the tree was planted into an American bonsai container by Joseph Godwin. A round red glazed container was selected to contrast with the white flowers and to emphasize the slanting trunk line. In 1977 after the bonsai was established a large branch was removed to create a more refined shape. Continued pinching developed the full bushy growth. The first long branch was lowered using a guy wire.

The Dwarf brush cherry continued to develop with dedicated pinching and wiring of the upper branches. Finally the lower branch decided to grow into the correct position. In 1980 I began to display this bonsai and it continued to develop. The heavier trunk, branches and fuller canopy of foliage required a new container, both aesthetically and horticulturally. Noted ceramic

March 1980—

Terminal area shaped to the right side for movement.



August 1982—

Trunk beginning to thicken and the terminal area continues to be thinned out.



artist, Thomas Dimig was commissioned to create a new container for this bonsai.

In September 1993 the bonsai flew off the outdoor display table and the entire top of the bonsai was lost. A clean cut was made, leaving a small stump in hope and anticipation of new shoots. The following year several new shoots developed, one in an ideal location. The desired shoot was allowed to grow vigorously

for a few seasons and was gently wired into the ideal position. It developed into the perfect new trunk line, with a good taper and it is very difficult to notice now. Perhaps the accident was good, because it "pruned" the top increasing the taper and a smaller size.

I have found the Dwarf brush cherry, *Eugenia myrtifolia* 'Compacta', to be a very easy, forgiving and a sturdy species for cultivating indoors

in cold regions where it is not winter hardy. It is still the only "indoor" bonsai in my personal collection.



August 1993—

This is the Dwarf brush cherry as it was displayed in my exhibit commemorating my 30th year of bonsai study. After the exhibit the bonsai fell off the growing table and the entire top broke off. The August 2004 photo shows how the new top has developed in eleven years. The Japanese fern on the left was used to hide the heavy surface root but it was removed as can be seen in August 2004 photo.



Close-up detail of the pure white flowers produced on the Dwarf brush cherry. This specimen blossoms every summer, generally in July and August, although occasional flowers are often produced throughout the year.



August 2004—

Dwarf brush cherry, Eugenia myrtifolia 'Compacta', in full blossom. Note how the shiny dark green leaves sharply contrast with the pure white flowers and how the flowers contrast with the handmade American bonsai container by Thomas Dimig. Bright purple fruit were produced after flowering which also contrasted with the glazed container.

