

An unrolling stone

By Andrew Smith

Nearly everyone has heard the old saying that, “A rolling stone gathers no moss.”

In the modern world the significance of this saying is somewhat hard to get at, especially since a certain rock band made those two words, stone and rolling, so glow-in-the-dark radioactive that all previous associations have been blown out of the amp and forgotten.

But anyway, when we were kids we seemed to think that ‘a rolling stone gathering no moss’ meant that you had to eventually set down roots somewhere if you wanted to be part of a community with friends and family. And since “setting down roots” seemed to refer to gardening we figured we’d grow watermelons and m&m bushes. Them were the days.

But then, I began to wonder where this metaphor of the “rolling stone” came from, because it seemed to be somewhat derogatory. In nature, any stone that rolls will quickly come to the bottom of the hill and stop. It won’t just go rolling on and on forever. The saying makes it seem like “rolling” might be a lifestyle choice for a stone, and a bad one at that. As if the stone was at fault for being on a hill. But it isn’t so. It didn’t just climb up there one day so it could roll down again. And even if it does start rolling it will soon hit the bottom and come to a stop. And then it will gather moss. Which is why, in actual fact, you often find piles of mossy boulders right in the cool, dark, bottom of the canyon.

Recently though, I’ve begun to think that maybe the saying is just about moss and rocks and doesn’t need a sociological interpretation. Why should everything always be about us? For moss is a beautiful, almost a magical, thing. And a stone that has moss on it is like a miniature world all to itself, a sort of hidden green paradise that we walk right over without even seeing. Heaven might not be overhead, but underfoot.

Maybe the saying just means, “Look! These stones have been meditating in this cool, dark canyon bottom for countless years. The wisdom and virtue they have gained is that green moss. Look!”

Could be. Anyway, I think growing bonsai has taught me to really love moss. At a distance it's a fine silvery-blue-green carpet, dewy and soft as fur. Sometimes it's a rich sea green, with dark red spore heads poking up. Some types grow like overlapping feathers and are almost golden in hue. Other kinds grow in thick green disks, while others make dense thickets and still others are as fine as down and brilliant as bits of shattered emerald. Looking down from above it's easy to make-believe it's a tiny, sunny, meadow.

But up close it's a towering primeval forest in a tiny, tiny place; a desolate, tangled wilderness I know nothing about. There are dark places in the moss forest, places where unimaginable creatures live. There may not be monsters lurking anymore in our manicured woods and parks with their clean gravel paths. But I guarantee if you could shrink us down small enough to take a hike in the moss forest, there would be monsters, and I'd want my ray gun.

So maybe it's still Heaven, but with an edge.

When I first started growing bonsai I remember being a bit disappointed to learn that moss is not usually kept on a bonsai pot year around. Instead, it's something that is added to the soil surface when the tree is going to be displayed. Letting the moss grow permanently on the pot can affect soil aeration, water flow and drainage, as well as growing into the bark of the bonsai and making it slough off.

I didn't want any of that, so I kept all my trees pretty much moss free unless I was taking them to a show. But eventually I learned that some trees have root systems that seem to thrive with a carpet of moss growing on the pot. In my experience this was especially true of spruce trees. The moss seemed to create the perfect mix of aeration and humidity for the roots to grow in, and I often found that if I left moss growing on the pot the trees would sprout new roots right out into it. That's what I sometimes find out in the woods too – spruce seedlings will often grow for many years just in a deep bed of moss, without the root system ever getting down into real soil.

So then I changed my moss management technique and encouraged moss to grow permanently on the pots of my spruce and larch bonsai, while still keeping it off my pine and juniper bonsai. And that worked great. Everyone was happy.

Except. Except I began to notice that these moss-covered spruce didn't always winter well. They survived, sure enough, but sometimes looked a little more peaked in the spring than a winter-loving tree like a spruce tree should. So I began to poke around a bit and I discovered that while in the summertime the moss added humidity to the soil, in the wintertime it seemed to take it away. In sub-freezing conditions, and with my sub-par watering techniques, the moss seemed to keep water from penetrating into the soil. So the pots with moss on them were sometimes drier than pots that were moss-free.

So last year I removed all the moss from almost all the bonsai pots during the winter. And I did it again this winter too. And I learned something from doing that, which is: I have a couple square yards of moss that I can truly call my own. Heaven again.

That's a lot of moss. Last year I just put it on the greenhouse floor and hoped it would somehow thrive until I needed it again. But most of it dried out and then various rodents took what was left to weave tiny green sweaters and rugs out of. So this year I put it all into trays so I can water it and take care of it until spring. Now I have something like a dozen large trays of moss. I'm a moss-gathering fool, not a rolling stone.

I remember one winter, working on a steep, spruce-covered mountain slope. I was following a compass line and as I went off the ridge into the shadowed forest below the ground became an undulating, softly illuminated carpet of green moss. It seemed to glow underneath the towering, gloomy trees, the pale light seeping like water in every direction as far as I could see. The moss got deeper and deeper the further I went, until it was like walking on a giant, soft, glowing sponge. It was 10 or 12 inches thick and so soft that my boots cut sharp, dark, holes in it with every step. I stopped and looked upslope and I could see every footprint I'd made coming down the mountain. It was like walking through a field of deep new snow, but green. It seemed like I'd suddenly stepped a thousand centuries into the past.

And I've never come to another place like that one. In 30 years I've seen lots of moss-covered slopes, but nothing quite as ancient and primeval feeling as that. I like to think about it every once in awhile. But I don't think I'll be going back to spend the night. Not without my ray gun.

Even so, when I go out into my greenhouse on these short winter days it makes me smile to look at my trays of moss. The trees in their pots are leafless or sleeping through the cold. But the moss is a vivid green, a tiny wilderness, a wasteland, a paradise. And all I have to do is take the time to notice it.