

# Iowa Bonsai Association Newsletter

[www.iabonsai.org](http://www.iabonsai.org)

<https://sites.google.com/site/cedarrapidsbonsai/>

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## IBA May Activities

**All IBA Club meetings and Board meetings are canceled this month due to Covid - 19.**

*We hope that you and your trees stay healthy.*

*We will see you soon when this is over.*

## EIBA May Activities

**All Board Meetings and Club Meetings have been canceled.**

**May 14 Board Mtg Cancelled**

**May 21 Club Mtg Cancelled**

**June 20 Bonsai Show at New Bo -**

**No decision yet .**

*Stay in touch! Keep our bonsai community vibrant during tough times.*

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### Bonsai Soil Components for Sale

**Pumice \$20 for five gallons  
\$15 if you bring your own Bucket.**

**Akadama \$32 per bag, \$30 for members**

**Contact Scott Allen or Tim Peterson**

*By Michael Hagedorn*

Several years ago I came across this older trident forest being sold at a bonsai nursery, and was interested in its relaxed, natural-looking lines. The trunks all looked about the same size, roughly, and I suspected we'd be fiddling with it someday to correct that.

Earlier this spring we finally got around to correcting the homogeneity of the old forest's trunks simply by the addition of younger ones. Photo from last summer, with chopsticks representing where minor trunks might go.



This tree ended up being a quick quiz for Seasonal students over the next few months... 'Where do the new trunks go?



David, Garen and Larry excavate areas for the trunks at a Seasonal class in late winter. Sometimes it's easier to do such simple additions without taking the bonsai out of the pot.



Close up of our excavations. Chopsticks remain in place so we don't have the squirrel problem of remembering where our treasure is. Or where we want it to be.



Several of the small trunks in place



The finished composition, with seven new trunks. We did change the placement of several of them from our initial chopstick thinking, especially on the right side, adding a bit of space. None of the original older trunk placement was changed. As this was performed months ago, I can report that all the new additions survived; a greenhouse is a great stress reliever for aggressive root work on tiny saplings.

## How To Improve Your Bonsai Collection

John Denny

Everyone with bonsai trees imagines themselves with a beautiful collection of trees. Usually, a lot of trees. Trees of many species and many styles. All healthy, all beautiful. But there are limitations which we all live with. How much money, how much time, how much knowledge, how much space, how much ability do I have? It is worth knowing your limits mentioned above because they will affect, ultimately, how good your collection can be. To improve your collection you will have to improve your knowledge and ability, improve both summer and winter storage space, spend more time, spend more money. You do not need to do all of these things, but improve some of them. Once you are ready to improve your collection, here are a few thoughts on how to improve your bonsai collection.

First, if you already have a lot of trees, get rid of some. If you eliminate a third of your lesser quality trees, the average quality of your collection goes up. Plus, you can spend more time paying attention to and working on your best trees, which will continue to improve. Most people new to the hobby get excited and buy lots of cheap or low quality trees. This is natural. New hobbyists want to learn and having a variety of trees to work with allows for more rapid learning. But once you have ramped up your learning curve and can keep trees alive and healthy, it is time to work with higher quality trees. Give away or sell your lesser trees, trees with flaws, those with less of a future, any unwanted species, etc. Less is more!

Next, how do we build our collection back up with better trees?

1) Nursery stock is what most folks begin with. Instead of smaller, cheaper trees, begin looking for trees with bigger trunk caliper. This is the main characteristic that makes a tree look like a better tree and it is worth paying a bit more to acquire trees with bigger trunks. Look for nebari and the way the tree flares out as it enters the soil.

2) Dig your own. If you want more unique natural looking trees, dig your own. Find a good location, ask permission, and collect a tree. You will have to take care to help the tree survive the first year

as it transitions from its old location to your bench. And it will take time to become a decent tree. But unique trees help fill out a collection and they add character as well.

3) Buy trees from an experienced hobbyist who is upgrading their own collection. They may be shedding better trees than you have. You can often get a good deal and you can be sure to know the history of that tree. The seller often will be from your own club and can help you with tips on how to care for and improve the tree. Often you can get a decent pot along with the tree – a bonus.

4) Prebonsai can be purchased from specific bonsai vendors who offer trees specially grown for eventual creation of finished bonsai. Places like Brussels Bonsai come to mind. You can find young bonsai trees already in bonsai pots, but really not yet true bonsai. You will have to develop them. These places also offer larger, older prebonsai still in nursery containers which you can purchase and work with. These often have good trunk girth and movement. Look for healthy trees with good nebari and basic branch placement. This will allow you to have a good tree with excellent potential.

5) Workshop material is the next step up from prebonsai. A workshop that supplies a tree is fun. You get a decent tree at a fair price, plus you get an expert to help you style the tree, teach you techniques, maybe even do the harder work on your tree, and teach you how to care for and style the tree into the future. A great way to go. Bring a friend and you will you will have even more fun!

6) True yamadori, or collected trees, is often the next level to improve your collection. If you want to add very old trees (100+ years of age), you likely will have to collect or buy from collectors, conifers grown in high elevation areas out west. Look for Ponderosa pines, limber pines, Rocky Mountain junipers, etc. Andy Smith of Golden Arrow Bonsai offers excellent trees at very good prices. If you want some really good yamadori and have the money, look into Back Country Bonsai (Dan and Steve), Michael Hagedorn, Randy Knight or Ryan Neill., or Ron Heinen/Scott Allen. Look for aged deadwood. The

more the better. Look for great trunk movement, especially on junipers. And make sure the foliage is healthy. Ask how long the tree has been in a growing container and how the roots looked when collected and potted. Yamadori can be wild, rugged, aged looking trees and can really make your collection pop. Do your research and buyer beware of weak trees that might not make it in the long run.

7) Finished bonsai trees are an immediate way to improve your collection. No waiting. Spend the money and you can find beautiful bonsai already in nice pots where all the growing and developing steps have been done for you. Now you simply have to keep up with good finished bonsai techniques and your tree will continue to shine. You can often show these trees almost immediately, if you like placing your trees into shows.

Another key way to improve our collection is to improve each of our trees season over season, year over year. Now, how do we do a better job of improving our trees year over year? 1) Improve your knowledge. 2) Improve your skill. 3) Have someone more expert help you.

Improve your knowledge through attending club meetings, reading books, watching videos (anything by Bjorholm or Hagedorn is good) finding good sources of information on the internet (Bonsai Empire, Bonsai Tonight, Peter Tea, Michael Hagedorn, Bjorn Bjorholm blogs are great), attend workshops and learn from the teacher, join a study group with a good teacher that meets 3 or 4 times a year is a great way to gain knowledge. Newcomers to bonsai often see their trees suffer setbacks from winter damage, pests, diseases, etc. Gain the knowledge you need regarding pesticides, miticides, fungicides. Learn how to more safely store you trees over winter. The more you improve your knowledge, the fewer setbacks your trees will suffer. Another way to improve your knowledge is to attend bonsai shows. The higher the quality of the show the more you will learn. Visit the Chicago show or a national show if you can. Or you can buy “picture books” of the shows where each tree is nicely photographed in its display while at a show. You can learn so much from these books. Study various species, styles, accent plants, pot selections, display furniture, etc. Kokufu books are especially wonderful.

Improve your bonsai skills. First buy good tools which make it easier to improve your skills. Learn to use those tools properly to master techniques of pruning, deadwood creation, bending branches, etc. Watch how masters use these tools. Workshops are great for this as you can see up close how a teacher handles a technique, say, creating a jin. He cuts the branch first. Does he use a saw, a concave cutter, or pruning shears? How does he hold each tool? What is the exact placement and motion to make the tools work best? What order does he do things? What tool does he use to strip the bark? He likely has many tips like using pliers to crush the end of the cut branch to loosen the bark. He likely will use scissors or concave cutters or possibly a knife to cut a ring just through the bark around the base of the jin branch where it attaches to the trunk, so when you pull off the bark it will not peel down the trunk. Next there are several ways to remove the wood so you do not have a round pencil like branch with a squared off end. The master can teach you details of how to do it. Then he will let you try. As you attempt to jin your first branch, he will show you several ways to improve your technique. Learning techniques from a master is way faster than reading about it or even watching someone, and then trying it yourself in a trial and error manner. A key technique that is critical to learn is wiring. You have to learn this hands on. You will feel awkward and clumsy at first. But a master can quickly improve your hand and finger placement so you can manage the wire better. He can show you how to support the branch safely and show you how to use pliers to help apply and bend bigger gauge wire. Again, trial and error with a teacher is the way to learn. He can show you how to anchor wire, how to use guy wires, how to avoid crossing wires, how to prep a branch to make it easier to wire, how to get the correct tension, spacing, and pitch of the wire on the branch.

Another critical technique to learn is repotting. Understanding soils, learning how to clean old soil effectively and safely, root pruning, tying in your tree, adding and working in soil, finishing the surface are all important techniques to learn. Watching an expert do it will help you learn a critical skill.

I have mentioned having an expert show you how to master bonsai techniques. How do you find and afford expert help? You can attend workshops taught by masters for around \$50 -\$100 (bring your own tree). You only get a few minutes of the experts time in a workshop, but you can learn a lot. Better yet is to join a study group which is a small group of hobbyists who hire an expert to help them learn and work on their own trees. This group meets 3 or 4 times per year to learn what work needs doing on your trees as they move through each season. This is a great way to go and typically costs \$60-100 per day. You get a lot more time with the expert and he helps you improve your trees. There are more and more “Seasonals” taught by top masters, where you go to the master where he lives and work on his trees. This is significantly more expensive, but a great experience. I was able to work on superb trees, including one that was featured in a top bonsai magazine.

Learning all the many techniques associated with good bonsai is half the battle when trying to improve your trees year after year.

Some other ways to improve your collection that you may not have considered.

- 1) Buy better pots! A good pot makes your tree pop. The old Japanese rule was to spend the same amount on a pot as you did on your tree. A thousand dollar tree should have a thousand dollar pot! Well, I won't adamantly stand by this guideline, but you get the idea. Improve your pots and those viewing your collection will swear the trees have improved!

- 2) Grow and keep accent plants to go with your trees. Accents can be fun in and of themselves. My dear wife loves bonsai accent plants, which is why mine keep disappearing! Accent plants make your trees look better. Plus, you are better prepared to enter shows.

- 3) Improve your outdoor display area so your trees can look good. Rather than throwing a nice tree on a rusty old table only 18 inches off the ground (so you only look down onto the top of the bonsai), place it on a nice wooden bench at 36-40 inches height. Your tree will look much better. Build two or three of the single post stands and show your best two or three

trees of the season. This will make your collection improve and they create an immediate impression on anyone coming to see your bonsai.

Okay, that was a long article with many ideas on improving your collection. Overwhelmed? Don't think you have the cash to improve your collection? Here is my plan B. Everyone has a rich uncle. Buddy up to him for a couple of months. Mow his lawn. Buy him his favorite bottle of scotch. Tell him how great he looks in his new toupee. Then take him on a long jog – uphill. Caveat: you must be in better shape than your rich uncle! Otherwise he will inherit your bonsai collection instead of you inheriting his money! No rich uncle? Then tell your kids that college is too expensive and they can make more money as a plumber anyway. Then sneak some of that 529 college money you squirreled away for them and take a road trip in search of great trees!

Alright, back to reality now. Money makes it easier to improve your collection. However, most of us have emptier pockets than we'd like. Review the list above as there are several cheap ways to improve one's collection. For me, the time factor has helped. Each year I have purchased a couple new tools and now I have plenty. Each year I added a couple good pots, attended a couple of workshops with good trees provided, I acquired trees from better collections, I learned ways to improve the trees I had each year. After ten years, viola! Improvement at a reasonable price. Age has its advantages.

Take the long view with your collection. Think big picture. Slow and steady improvement, year over year, and you will get there. Look over the quality of your bonsai collection today. Make plans to improve it over the next year. A year from now I hope to hear several of you tell me how much your collection improved and then tell me just how you did it! Best of luck and have fun on the way!

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## **Timley Tips**

*John Denny*

This time of year, your trees should really be growing with all the sun, moisture, warmer temps

and a bit of fertilizer. Deciduous growth is prolific with beautiful shades of green and perfectly shaped leaves still in pristine condition. Juniper tips are extending and foliage is filling out. Pine candles are pushing now, too.

With rain, wind, and wildly fluctuating temperatures this time of year, one of the real challenges to healthy bonsai is watering. As we have all heard, watering is the hardest thing to learn. Besides rain, winds, changing temps, we also have the variables of deeper vs shallow pots, our tree species in our collections might have varying natural water needs – a maple requires more water than a white pine, the porosity of the soil in each pot also is a major watering variable, recently potted soil will drain faster than soil that is two years old. How do we balance all these factors in deciding how much to water? Well, it's not easily done. That is why experts suggest using highly draining soil so you cannot over water and to keep most or all of your trees in the same or similar soils. Having too many soil types confuses you when determining how to water.

But, basically, you have to pay attention. Be in the moment. Be one with your tree! I know, it sounds a bit Zen. If you have more than one tree think about how each tree has been doing recently. Has it been taking up water normally? Is it healthy? How fast has it been growing? Then consider the weather yesterday and today. Has it rained? A bit or a lot? How windy is it today? How sunny and how warm is it today? Asking yourself these questions should help you figure out, do I need to water today at all, water lightly, or heavily? And each tree may have its own answer. Do not automatically pour the same amount of water on each tree. Stick your finger into the soil to see how wet or dry it is each time you get ready to water. Use a wooden skewer and place it in the soil for a few minutes to help you assess moisture level of the soil. And when you water, water thoroughly until water runs out the drain holes. Also, water each tree twice, using two different watering angles. Watering is a challenging puzzle. Get it right and your trees will love you!