Iowa Bonsai Association Newsletter

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

June 2020 Volume 70, Issue 6

IBA June Activities

All IBA Club meetings and Board meetings are cancled this month due to Covid - 19.
Good day all. I hope you and your Bonsai's are well. We don't have an IBA calendar yet as all our meetings are cancelled until things start to improve.

EIBA June Activities

June 11, 6:30 pm, Board Meeting at John Denny's House, on the patio.

Topics: Meet and Greet or Who are you again? NewBo Show status, how to involve members without live meetings, Picnic plans..

June Picnic pushed back to July 18.
June Bonsai Show at NewBo - TBD

Inside This Issue

On the Ephemeral Beauty of Bonsai

By Michael Hagedorn

Bonsai change, often significantly, in the space of hours, days, months. The growth of spring shoots; flowers turning to fruit. The nibbles of insects. The loss of a branch, a restyling. Formation of bark. A pot change. A new viewpoint. Time and the passage of it are what we work with in bonsai, as much a medium as a leaf or needle. And that ephemerality and mutability is an integral part of the beauty of bonsai.

Eisei-en Bonsai Nursery

By John Denny

Bjorn Bjorholm is a well-known top bonsai teacher and personality. He has spent many years in Japan, first as a bonsai apprentice, then as a certified bonsai professional. Bjorn returned to the Us, settled in Tennessee where he bought land and started his bonsai nursery, Eisei-en.

I met Bjorn several years ago, along with his parents, at Brussels Bonsai. I enjoyed my workshop with him so much, I did two workshops with him the following year. He is genuinely a nice guy. His knowledge and experience is top notch. He has made just short of a zillion videos over the years and is excellent with camera work and his presentation skills are as good as anyone in bonsai. His trees are beautiful and it is so much fun watching his seemingly effortless work as he wires and styles trees.

Bjorn has held a couple of workshops at the Magruder farm in Indianola. Since Bjorn is good,

he is not cheap to hire. However, there is a way to learn and learn from Bjorn. And YOU set the price. This spring Bjorn began Bonsai U. He is creating videos he releases every other Thursday where he teaches you how to go about various bonsai projects. The quality is terrific. Go to his website: Eisei-en.com and check everything out. But, especially, look for his Bonsai U. Sign up for free. Donate if you find it valuable. You have access to new videos as well as old ones. I just watched him style a shohin Sekka Hinoki. Fun to watch and I learned some good styling tips and also care tips that apply to the standard Hinoki cypress I own.

While at his website, take a tour of his garden, look at his trees, and check out his videos. Here is an opportunity to learn from the best. In this day of no club meetings due to Covid, this is the way to go to feed your bonsai habit.

Stories From a Bonsai Cemetery
John Denny

Lately I have been thinking about mortality. Mine, in particular. I had a birthday last month. Each birthday brings me a year closer to my demise. Add in the pestilence called Covid-19 and my thinking goes in that direction. My 91 year old mother tested positive last month and my brother and I discussed funeral plans. But, the old girl made a miraculous overnight recovery while in the hospital. Life goes on.

I hear you thinking, why write a mournful piece for the newsletter? Well, this pondering of death and dying made me think of my "bonsai cemetery". I have done bonsai for fifteen or twenty years. I began a spreadsheet long ago, to keep track of my trees, where they came from, what pot they are in, when last potted, soil type, and notes about each tree. It was a helpful, albeit, slightly nerdy, technique.

As happens when you begin keeping bonsai trees, they often need more from you than you know how to give. Low on bonsai knowledge in those days, I lost a tree. Then another. Bonsai is rapture one minute, torture the next. I looked at my spreadsheet and planned to simply delete them from my inventory. But, a sudden inspiration hit me. What if I simply drag the deceased tree to a space below the inventory of living trees? It seemed respectful of the tree to keep a place for it. Thus, I began moving trees I lost to the lower part of the spreadsheet. And, like a coroner, I typed in the reason for death. I labeled the area "Bonsai Cemetery".

I did not think much of this cemetery space for a few years as I seemed to add a tree or two annually. Until recently. I asked myself if there was anything I could learn from examining my cemetery of lost trees. Are there patterns for cause of death that would tell me how to improve my bonsai care practices. Was I losing trees because of poor watering? Or poor over wintering? Pests and disease?

So, let's took a walk through my bonsai cemetery.

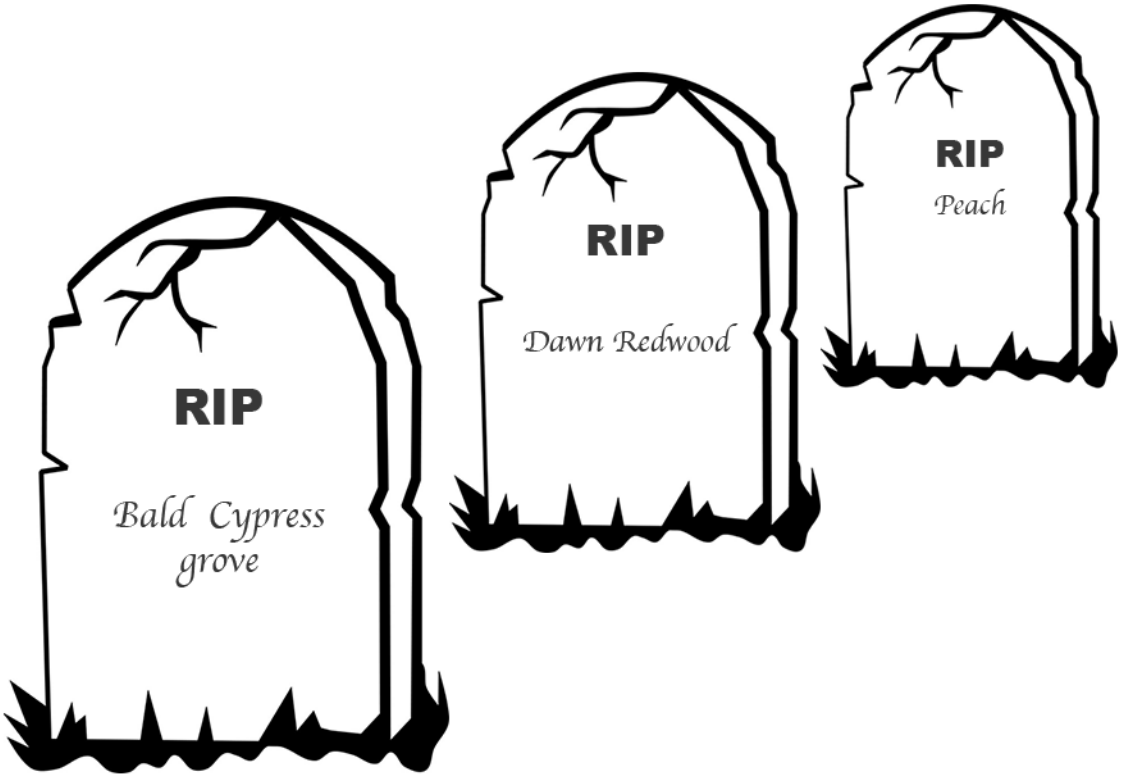
My early trees were generally cheap and winter hardy. My very first tree was the typical Procumbans nana. I had it for 15+ years before it expired. I had an Eastern Red Cedar, and a Boxwood. Then I got brave and discovered Brussels Bonsai. My first trip was with Craig Bean, who knew a lot more than I did about bonsai. I did a workshop with Brussel himself and with Craig's help, created a 15 tree Trident forest. Three of the trees had trunk diameters over an inch. In the large oval white pot, it looked nice. Very nice. I showed it in the fall of that year at a local club show. Bill Ball saw it and said, "YOU made that? YOU? No, really, YOU?" I understood his point. I was a rookie, but with Brussel instructing and Craig helping, the forest turned out beautiful. It also was the first tree in the cemetery, sad to say. I put my trees outside over winter back then and barely had to water them. I put my special forest in the garage – and barely ever watered it. It never leafed out. Cause of death: poor watering/ over wintering.

The next headstones we see on our cemetery walk are a Peach, Dawn Redwood, and a Bald Cypress grove which I do not even remember.

The Peach and Dawn Redwood were trees out of their comfort zone here in Iowa. And I did not have the knowledge then to protect them. The following year I went to Brussels again. I ran into Michael Hagedorn who said I should sign up for his large Shimpaku juniper workshop as the material was excellent. So, I did. The tree came out fantastic and I have a great photo standing proudly beside Michael with scissors in our hands showing off the tree next to us. I still have the photo. Not the tree. It did okay the balance of the first year. It over wintered alright. I repotted this large tree from its nursery container to a ceramic pot. I cut a lot of roots and crammed it into the pot. I did a poor job of wiring it in firmly, not knowing any better. The tree wiggled around in heavy spring winds. Over the summer the foliage browned in areas and it slowly just went downhill. It did not survive the winter. Now, I suspect it had spider mites and I didn't know what those were. Cause of death: mites and ignorance.

In 2010. I first visited Michael Hagedorn in Oregon, for his first 3 day Seasonal. It was eye opening, to say the very least. We learned how to really pot up a tree, how to water, and so much more.

Michael gave me a truly nice shohin Olive with a fat trunk and nice branch placement. I brought it home in a suitcase.



The following year I put it in a pot. After a few days of protection post potting, I put it outside. The next day, April 1, we visited relatives for the day. I did not see the forecast. It was 85F with winds over 20 mph. In a day, the tree was gone. Ouch. Cause of death: failure to track the weather forecast. That was on me.

The next year I lost a small azalea, 2 Fuji Cherry seedlings, and a Procumbans cascade (mites). Around this time I met Gary Wood who began teaching me so much about bonsai (and life). I had done a workshop in Chicago and come home with an average San Jose juniper. Gary saw it and said, "Don't buy stuff like this. You want to improve your collection, not add more :"averageness" to it. Point taken, Sensei! The San Jose juniper heard this discussion and died shortly thereafter of, guess what, mites. See a pattern? Gary taught me about mites, eggs, pesticides. My junipers now had a chance at life.

The next year I lost a Mugho pine to root rot. I lost a seiju elm, a Siberian elm and a European Beech. Not sure of the cause of death. That same year at Brussels I searched through what seemed like a thousand nice Sharp's Pygmy maples in sweltering heat and humidity. I tested each for good nebari with a chopstick while kneeling, trying desperately to keep the torrents of sweat out of my eyes. I looked for good low branches, trunk girth, and limited whorls. I found one. Gary said, "Good tree, Johann". Progress. Gary worked on the tree and pronounced it a year from ready for the Chicago show. One day that winter, I decided to skip my usual early morning workout. It was bitter cold. I drank coffee, then around 10 am, left for an errand. To my shrieking dismay, as I stepped into the garage, I saw the garage door wide open. I calmed down and realized my middle school boys likely left it up as they ran for the bus. Or it went down, didn't close properly and went back up. Roughly three hours of bitter cold exposure to my trees. I worried for the rest of the winter over how many trees would not survive. It turned out, the only tree that didn't leaf out was the lovely and large Sharps pygmy maple in a nice pot. The nebari, girth and wonderfully wired branch structure still existed. And the nice pot. I kept the tree on a shelf for five years. Each year at the Winter Garden Show, our club gave a class on bonsai. I brought the tree to show how wiring works. In January, no one knew the tree was dead, even a few club members were fooled. I finally tossed the tree when I needed the pot. That was a tough loss. Lessons learned: check your garage door, have a temp alarm in the garage, don't skip your morning workout, and think twice about having kids.

I grew several shohin Zelkovas from seedlings. A cool project with excellent results. But, Japanese beetles LOVE them above all other trees in my yard. They totally defoliated them two years back. They grew leaves back, but were not as strong at years end. The following year, Japanese beetles hit them again. And three weeks later after baby leaves came out, another round of the little bastard insects chewed them once again. Now the trees were terribly weak all Fall with tiny leaves barely larger than a Proton.

At this point, I would like to say that as I learned more and more about taking care of bonsai, that I never lost another tree to the boneyard. But, of course, I have. Learning is continual. I have lost fewer trees over the past few years. Winter storage is better. I spray more often. I catch problems and correct them prior to full on death. On this point I recall Gary Wood once telling me while looking at a possibly dead tree, "You're tree ain't plumb dead, but its some dead!" I can live with that. And so did the tree.

Thanks for walking with me through the bonsai cemetery. So, what lessons can we learn from the dead?

Do an autopsy to learn the cause of death. Look at the roots closely. Check for pests, fungus, totally dry soil, soggy mucky soil. Did you use a chemical lately? Are other trees affected? Ask an expert to help figure it out, if you cannot.

Write down a list of why your trees died. Ask yourself are there patterns? You can do some serious improving if you isolate a common pattern of failure. I did. Now I spray a bit more often for fungus in the spring time. I blast juniper foliage with water to knock off any mites who have evil intentions.

Perhaps you could title your list of passed on trees,
In Memoriam.
""Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."
Give me an Amen, Bonsai Brother!

Roots: Out of Sight, Out of Mind?
John Denny

Fully one third of every bonsai tree remains out of sight, only to be seen once every couple of years at repotting season. So, how much do we really know about bonsai tree roots? What is their purpose? How do they work? How can I screw them up? How can I make them function better?

The root system is just as important as all the tree's parts above ground. The roots hold the tree upright. This is true in a bonsai, too, although repotting disturbs this function, so we usually wire the tree into the pot to keep it upright until the roots have grown back and become firmly held in the soil. The roots collect and move both water and nutrients from the soil into the tree, a critical function. Roots can store food for emergency use. Witness some trees like ficus that can lose all its branches yet is able to survive. Roots also are involved in the hormone function of the tree producing cytokinens which communicate and control to some degree the actions of the leaves and branches.

We also know if we make a serious error and damage the root system, we can kill our tree. Errors like under watering, over watering, over fertilizing, over pruning, damaging root hairs during root pruning, etc.

A tree's roots can extend much further than its canopy. Pioneering species, say an Elm or Juniper, will send one or two very long roots out which helps it find water and nutrients. I heard a Master Gardener say he uses the following formula to determine the distance a root system extends from a tree: take the diameter of the tree, say 10 inches, multiply by 1.5, giving you 15. The root system extends 15 feet from the trunk. That is in your yard. It is very different in a bonsai pot where the canopy can extend twice the width of the root system.

The tree needs a constant supply of food and water to survive. These enter the tree through the root system. Dissolved minerals and water are absorbed, by osmosis, through the root hairs along the tips of each small root. These nutrients are carried up to the leaves where they are converted into complex carbohydrates, which are the food that the tree uses.

Each of the root hairs is actually only one meristem cell which has elongated to protrude a few millimeters from the surface of the root. By osmosis, the dissolved minerals are passed into the root hair and then, by fluid pressure, passed through the xylem layer all the way up to the leaves.

Bonsai trees like to have their roots in moist, but not wet, soil at all times. This means that the soil must never be allowed to completely dry out or the tree will quickly die. If you discover one day that your bonsai is wilted and has drooping leaves but was in perfect health the previous day, it's safe to assume you probably forgot to water it. Watering too often, however, can also harm the tree because it can allow root rot to set in.

Soil composition has important interactions with the roots. You want a fast draining environment that retains just enough moisture for the following 24 hours. A coarse soil provides a multitude of tiny spaces for air and this aids the growth of the roots.

When a bonsai's roots grow to where they completely fill the pot they have become root bound. When this happens the mass of dense roots inside the pot prevents water from draining through the pot and causes it to merely over flow the edges of the pot.

Because repotting is done on a bonsai only once every few years, it should be taken as an opportunity to carefully examine the tree's root system. While the bonsai tree roots are exposed and spread out, look for roots that are spongy or of an unhealthy color. An unhealthy color is one that is dark brown or black when the root is scraped with your fingernail. If you find any, remove them so that only strong healthy roots remain.
Next begin pruning unwanted roots. The type of roots that you want to keep on the tree are the thin, short ones. These have many more root hairs than do thick, long roots. Roots that are the diameter of a drinking straw or larger and are long should be removed from the tree. After removing all the large roots, you should have a mass of very thin, short roots.

Be careful when removing soil from the roots. Root hairs are thinner than a human hair and can be destroyed either physically or through drying out. Be gentle in combing out roots and keep the roots moist if repotting outside in hot, windy conditions. Aftercare is important when finished repotting. Since those root hairs have been severely reduced through root pruning and damage, the tree's ability to acquire moisture and nutrients is now limited until the roots and root hairs can recover. Meanwhile the canopy can still transpire moisture out of the tree and the tree is limited now in its ability to absorb water and transport it to replenish the water the leaves have just lost. That is why you must keep you newly potted tree away from heat and wind. And do not fertilize a newly repotted tree for three weeks or so, because the root hairs cannot handle the fertilizer yet. Thoughtless aftercare is responsible for many tree deaths in the spring time. Understanding your roots should help limit those losses.