

IBA News & Muse
Iowa Bonsai Association Newsletter
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IBA AUGUST Activities

August 19, 7pm, IBA MEETING

Des Moines Botanical Garden

Topic: *Tree critique and judging of Botanical Center trees and "best of" bonsai websites – finding information online.*

EIBA AUGUST Activities

August 14, 6 pm, Board Mtg. Nothing But Noodles Restaurant. *Topics include Bruce more Show and Soil Making*

August 15, 16, 17 Chicago Bonsai Show at Chicago Botanic Garden

August 17, pm, EIBA Club Mtg. Meet at Al Klimesh home (2004 C St). *Topics to include Bruce more Show and Brussels Bonsai Rendezvous trip next spring. Following will be a trip to Pleasant Valley Nursery in Iowa City.*

August 23, 9 am, Bruce more Garden and Art Show. *EIBA to display trees on west porch. Come check us out.*

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"Your tree looks some dead, but not plumb dead!"

"This is why we buy scissors and wire."

"We grow this stuff, so we can cut it off."

Gary Wood



Toyo Nishiki Flowering Quince

Lovely small Chinese Quince by Bill Valvanis.

Timely Tips

Following a quiet, cooler than usual Iowa July, we have an even cooler Iowa August. Trees have been quietly growing all summer, not having to fight the usual heat and near dormancy which heat brings to plants.

Keep up your watering regimen, but make sure you are observing your trees and how quickly they are using water. Observe how the water hits the soil surface. Is it running off or soaking in properly? Can you see it running out of the drain holes? Watering this time of year can be routine, but do not fall asleep and miss an observation. Watch your trees for signs of wilting. If your soil is not allowing water to enter adequately, you can try removing the top surface layer of old soil and replace it with fresh new soil. If the problem is deeper, use a chopstick to poke openings down into the soil to help water penetrate more deeply. Plan on repotting that tree into new soil next spring.

Speaking of observations, how do you know a tree is doing well and is healthy? Take a look at the general color of the foliage. Is it normal? Nice and green as it should be? Or is it grayish, yellowish, lighter than normal? Are leaves or needles dropping earlier than usual this time of year? Another observation is to take a look at how long the new growth extensions are. If your tree has only pushed short extensions, it may not be very strong. Conversely, if the extensions are long and it has pushed many new leaves, then you have a strong tree. Whether your tree is healthy and strong or not, determines how much bonsai work you can do on it. If your tree is not strong, then you need to keep asking questions until you determine the cause of your issue and then find a solution to get your tree back on track. It all begins with simple observations.

Observe your foliage for black spot or other fungus. Watch junipers for possible signs of spider mites. They become active in hot dry periods. Catch them early before they do significant damage.

There are a couple of local bonsai shows coming up. Take a look to see if you might have a tree worthy to enter. Go for it!

Korean vs. Red Leaf Hornbeam

By John Denny

Two beautiful hornbeams belonging to Bill Valvanis.



Red Leaf Hornbeam

Red Leaf Hornbeam. Stately tree. Open, airy. Natural feel.



Korean Hornbeam

Korean Hornbeam. Trunk. Pot. Foliage colors. Wow!

IF ONLY...; REGRETS, SINS, and BLATANT STUPIDITY IN PERSUIT OF PERFECT BONSAI

By Ivan Hanthorn

I have been a gradually improving student of bonsai for a bit over 15 years, following upon preceding interests in suiseki, saikai, Japanese gardens, ikebana, Japanese woodblock prints, Japonisme, and Japanese aesthetics in general over the decades since becoming enthralled with Hiroshige and Hokusai woodblock prints in Art History 101 in my freshman year at university. I used to joke that it was only in my last stage of study of Japanese aesthetics that I finally got to the torturing of little trees. This is simply to posit that with a bit of knowledge of relevant aesthetic fields it seems not illogical to assume that errors and missteps might be fewer and less grievous than a beginner that knew little of bonsai before getting involved. Ha!

My family had a small town greenhouse and floral shop business. Consequently I had years of experience with mixing soil, potting plants, daily watering, pruning plants, etc. One would think that I would certainly not have a problem keeping most if not all bonsai development stock and more finished bonsai material alive and well. Ha!

In looking back over the years since I began to deliberately attempt to keep bonsai material alive through time in tiny pots and in the process shape the tree to portray an intended design appearance, it now seems clear that many of my mistakes were attributable to my impatience. That is a personality flaw I have failed to overcome throughout my life. But in addition to the inherent behavioral quirk the fact that it was late in life when I finally came to bonsai meant that I thought I had only a short time in which to master this new botanical art form. I was in a rush. Now if there is anything that bonsai does teach you, it is do not be in a rush. Plan well, execute in a timely manner, but do not rush. The consequences of rushing in bonsai can be ugly trees; wasted efforts and money; and fatalities of plant material. And there eventually is an accumulation of evidence of random stupidity, which one needs to hide from those who really know bonsai.

So, given the *apologia* above, what might I do differently if I were to begin again? First off would be a much earlier attention to soil formula. I murdered plants for several years before I truly understood that with a good bonsai soil in both formula and content one cannot overwater a bonsai and therefore suffer root rot. I now usually but not always use the Boon mix formula for potting soil. Bonsai are different than any other plant material you will encounter. They are not house plants; they are not patio plants. So their soil needs are different and unique. Surprise? This is profoundly important but usually takes a while to fully comprehend.

One needs to simultaneously come to truly understand that one must always adequately water. Porous soil that drains appropriately also dries out rather quickly. Correct soil and watering practices are thus two intricately interwoven basic care and maintenance practices for success with bonsai. These concerns obtain not only during the growing season but also during the winter storage season. Late winter/early spring is probably the most critical period to be very attentive to watering needs. This is the killing season.

Pots were where I truly lost control very early. I have way too many bonsai pots. Pots are in the back yard, in the garage, in the basement, under my desk, in the laundry room, in the car, and even turn up elsewhere where I least expect them. Pots can easily become a fetish or at least addictive. It is easy to buy a pot that is very attractive even when one does not have a particular tree in mind. Pots can have a collectable aspect to them—pots by famous potters, antique pots, pots with associational value, and so forth. And every time you acquire a potted bonsai that does not survive your care routines, you have an extra pot. Of course, pots easily break. The in-town animal herd can push pots off shelves and ledges, your own handling and storage routines can eventually result in edge dings, and weather takes a toll on many pots, particularly those of Chinese manufacture. So a few extra pots can be useful. I regret that I did not early on develop a plan of acquiring two pots (and only two pots) for each bonsai I intended to develop. The first pot would be a resident pot, the second pot would be a show pot. Both would be chosen with a tree in mind to fit the pot. Korean mica pots, of which there are a number of sizes and designs, are superior resident pots. They are essentially indestructible and when oiled are rather attractive. They can also be drilled for creating anchor holes for tie-down wires. Had I followed this simple plan—two pots for each tree already in hand, one a residential pot preferable of Korean mica, and only acquired after the tree is acquired—I would have far fewer pots and far fewer broken pots to grieve over. And more money in the bank.

I made the mistake of many new to bonsai—I wanted one of everything. In a rather short time you can get more little trees than you can keep up with, probably inadequate shelf space with the right light, and consequent slow plant failure. If in the fall when you start putting things into winter storage you realize you have not looked at some of your trees for a good long while, you have arrived at the point of having too many bonsai in training.

I wish I had learned more about each species I wanted as a bonsai before I acquired the tree. Again, I was in a rush. So many beautiful bonsai and so little time. The biggest temptation and most expensive error in rushing into bonsai is to buy expensive well developed bonsai trees before you really know enough about that particular species to take care of it well through time. You can easily and quickly build a collection of large dead wood, making your personal universe look otherworldly.

I do wish I had thought further about the amount of available winter care space of appropriate type for bonsai at point of acquisition rather than after. Inadequate winter storage space can be fatal to the plant material. Strangely, this is often more fatal for tropical than temperate zone material. I originally treated tropical bonsai material like tropical house plants, which had been a part of my life for decades. That is, I put them in south and west window light zones in the cold season. But in any house that is a finite space. So artificial lights for the rest. Unfortunately, for the plants to prosper more than standard two-bulb fluorescent shop fixtures are needed. Better light fixtures and adequate space are necessary to get more than a very few tropical through year after year of winters. I am only now finally completing a total upgrading of florescent lighting for wintering tropicals, and the results are much improved winter health of the bonsai.

I now use fixtures that hold from 4 to 8 T5 highlight fluorescent tubes. (*AgroMax* is just one of many brands of T5 tubes now available with a range from 3000 to 10000K light spectrum, depending on your design set point. I use 6400K general grow bulbs.) A dedicated space in a basement room with extra insulation is now devoted to wintering my tropical bonsai.

Tools are expensive. They should be cared for. I have not done well by my bonsai tools. I have many duplicates, of which too many are in constant need of rust removal treatment and sharpening. If I were just starting to build a bonsai tool set, I would buy only stainless for the rust free qualities of these very expensive tools. I would buy far fewer tools. And I would like to quit forgetting where I leave them in the yard as I walk around my spread out bonsai collection. At least with stainless tools, they would be shiny and found more easily than the often rusted archaeological find of a rusted bonsai tool long lost in the backyard jungle. A good basic set would include a heavy duty scissor, a light scissor, a wire cutter, a good spherical knob cutter, a concave cutter, two bonsai pliers, a good supply of restaurant chop sticks, a pot saw, a pine needle bent tip tweezer, a very sharp grafting knife, and a few cups of metal or plastic for soil and surface dressings. If I could afford one more tool, it would be a root cutter. Many other tools are available, but they can wait. Meanwhile your collection of gardening and general household tools contain instruments that will suffice in many instances. John Naka has a list of essential tools in his *Bonsai Techniques 1* that was gathered mainly from his garage.

There are many other things I wish I had done differently. Not that I have not had a great deal of fun and learned a lot in the process, but I would have stumbled less and killed fewer plants if I had not been in a rush, had a tree in mind when I acquired a pot, and remembered constantly that even though bonsai is properly an art form it uses living horticultural material that requires one to pay constant attention to the horticultural necessities so that there is living material with which to practice and perfect the art of bonsai.

Should any of our readers have their own "if only" lists, please send part or all of them to the editors. We would find them interesting, and maybe our readers would also.

Member Spotlight: Cat Nelson

I recently got a job in Iowa and am still somewhat in the process of relocating me and my bonsai to this state. In my previous bonsai life, I was the President of the Midwest Bonsai Society in Chicago and am still currently the Secretary of the American Bonsai Society. My closest bonsai club in Iowa is going to be the East Iowa Bonsai Association.

1. *How long have you been doing bonsai and how did you get started?*

I've been interested in bonsai since I was a child seeing them at the MN State Fair. I had a bonsai book as a teen and killed many an unsuspecting shrub in my experiments in trying to understand the art. Fast-forward to life after college where I traveled for a living and was not able to actively grow bonsai, but during that time discovered bonsai magazines and started reading. I would say I really actively started growing bonsai around 2004/2005 – with an elaborate automatic watering system set up in a condo that could water some tropicals while I was on the road. In 2006 I moved to Indiana, got a house and stopped traveling for months on end so was able to dive into the hobby head first.

2. *What do you like best about bonsai?*

I love trees; in a pot, in the wild, in paintings. Being able to reproduce that concept of a tree in miniature is really appealing to me.

3. *What are your favorite trees and what do you like about them?*

I will always have a soft spot for tropicals, as they are how I got started in bonsai. But my real passion is unusual-barked trees – crepe myrtles, stewartias, paperbark / lacebark species, etc. I love the colors and textures in the bark variations.

4. *What aspect of bonsai do you like best and what are you best at?*

I like pruning and wiring, when you're really concentrating on the structure and development of the tree. That's when I am thinking toward the future of what I want the tree to be and am really involved in it's branches. Best at, I'm fairly decent at wiring trees.

5. *What aspect of your bonsai ability would you like most to improve?*

Right now I am trying to improve my knowledge of conifers. I've only started growing conifers recently, and still learning their peculiarities.

6. *What bonsai experts have you worked with that you liked and why?*

I really like Ivan Watters for his honesty and years of experience, and Ryan Neil for his vision. Michael Hagedorn has a great sense of humor and Arthur Joura also has a great vision and sense of purpose.

7. *Do you have a bonsai highlight – trip, award, show, tree, workshop?*

Highlight – I think my best highlight was having a tree invited out to Valvanis' Shohin Symposium. The idea that one of my trees was of good enough quality to be considered for a national exhibit was really exciting!

Bonsai Smart: Juniper Deadwood Techniques

By Bjorn Bjorholm (taken from his “Advanced Tips and Techniques” article in this month’s ABS Newsletter)

One of the biggest aesthetic draws of Juniper bonsai is the characteristic twisted, gnarly deadwood that often features prominently in their design. Yamadori, or collected trees, often have heavily contorted trunks with deeply fissured deadwood that naturally interplays with the live vein, which ultimately keeps the foliage alive. Shimpaku, Needle, and Procumbens Junipers all possess their own unique dead-wood characteristics, making each species aesthetically interesting and enjoyable in their own right as bonsai. In certain instances, it may be necessary to create shari, or deadwood on the trunk, to add to the visual appeal of a Juniper bonsai. In this case, first outline the desired shape of the shari with chalk and use a sharp knife to remove a section of the live wood along the natural line of the trunk. Typically, only 20–30% of the total live tissue should be removed at one time for the safety of the tree. This technique can be performed year round.

The deadwood can then be peeled back with a variety of tools to give a more natural, feathered appearance to the final design. A chisel and hammer can also be utilized to add to the desired effect. Wood should be peeled and chiseled along the length of the deadwood to create a more natural look. In areas where bark or wood is difficult to remove with hand tools, an electric dremel tool can be used to clean those trouble areas. Be aware, though, that electric tools will often create an unnatural final appearance to the shari, so our recommendation is to use them sparingly if possible. Jin, or deadwood branches, can also be created by hand to add to the aged appearance of Juniper bonsai. Foliage should be removed first on the branch to be jinned, and the remaining live tissue can be crushed and removed with pliers. Branch tips should be broken and feathered back for natural effect. And again, electric tools can be used to clean up trouble areas.

Long-term maintenance of jin and shari is a major priority with Juniper bonsai. Both natural and man-made deadwood will rot over time through exposure to the elements and must therefore be cared for proactively. At Kouka-en, we typically wash the deadwood on Junipers twice per year using water and a basic toothbrush or nylon brush to first clean up the fungus and grime that naturally builds up during the year. Extra attention is paid to the shari at the trunk base, as this area tends to rot the fastest. The scrubbed grime is then rinsed off and the process is repeated as needed until the wood is as clean as possible. Next, a mixture of lime sulphur and water is then applied to the jin and shari. In most cases, we use a 1 to 1 ratio and add multiple coats as needed. Care should be taken to avoid getting the liquid on the live vein and tissue, as this looks unsightly and is potentially harmful if heavily applied. The yellowish color will fade within a couple of days, leaving the deadwood a nice, whitish hue.

After the lime sulphur dries, the live vein is then carefully rubbed with fine grain sandpaper to expose its natural, underlying reddish color. This technique is not a necessary one, but the contrast between the whitish deadwood and the reddish live vein is often aesthetically pleasing and adds to the character of the design. And of course, care should be taken to avoid damaging the live tissue. This technique can be applied to all Juniper species, however, extra care should be taken with Needle Junipers as their bark is rather thin and tears easily. Lastly, avoid rubbing the live vein with oil, as this can also be detrimental to the tree’s health.

State Fair in Brief

By Ivan Hanthorn

Gary Wood performed admirably as the judge of the 2014 Bonsai Show at the Iowa State Fair on August 10th. It was a very attractively laid out show, which always seems like a minor miracle given the very short amount of time in which to set up and arrange before judging begins and quickly thereafter the Agricultural Building opens to the public. (Think thundering herd.) Back drops were present this year, and the public noticed. We received complements from the fair audience about the attractiveness of a neutral backdrop for viewing the bonsai.

The *Best of Show* award went to Ron Heinen for an Iowa yamadori mulberry which has been refined over the years to be a very attractive and emotive piece that speaks to a Midwestern audience. Interestingly, this tree was originally collected from the farm of Alan and Helene Magruder, a site which has been the epicenter of good bonsai education for quite some time. There were forty bonsai exhibited at the fair. In addition to the Best of Show ribbon, seven each of blue, red, and white for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place quality were bestowed on competition exhibits.

Gary wanted the editors to tell the membership that the show was a very good bonsai show, certainly competitive with other club shows he sees around the country. The one challenge he noticed for the bonsai collectively was detail and finesse. For example, one of my bonsai, which did get a red ribbon, was exhibited in a truly wonderful pot, the stand did coordinate with the pot and the tree, the tree was in good form, and the companion piece was coordinate, but the total presentation would have been improved by a better selection for the companion piece stand. Details, details, details. He made similar detail comments on even the blue ribbon entries. The club membership in general knows how to develop and present bonsai. However, we could all benefit from paying greater attention to finesse. Good judges always teach us something—one of the benefits in risking ourselves to public scrutiny in a judged show.



The *Best of Show* award went to Ron Heinen for an Iowa yamadori mulberry

Companions Revisited

Ivan Hanthorn

A meeting program earlier in the year was devoted to companion plantings for bonsai—shitakusa and kusamono. I assembled a kusamono there as a demonstration; it has recovered nicely from its birthing shock. It showed up at the Iowa State Fair Bonsai Show, which was the point of the workshop. I thought you might be interested in its current appearance, following all that throwing around, heat, and stress. It survived well. This is right on schedule in appearance development and good health—about two months after assembly.

After that above noted demonstration Dave Lowman gave to me a fern that might be usable in a kusamono. Rising to the challenge, I put together another one in a Gary Wood low circular flat pot that was perfect for kusamono. The result is pictured below.

As I have remarked over and over and over, creating kusamono is a very enjoyable exercise in the same aesthetics employed in bonsai. It is also an opportunity to use odds and ends of plant material and pottery in a creative way. When done well they almost always provide visual testament to the old precept found deeply imbedded in Eastern and Western spiritual perception—take pleasure in the beauty inherent in the common.



Demonstration kusamono



Post workshop kusamono

