

IBA News & Muse
Iowa Bonsai Association Newsletter
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www.iabonsai.org

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IBA JULY Activities

JULY 15, 7pm, IBA MEETING

Des Moines Botanical Garden

Topics: Show preparation (Iowa State Fair and shows in general). Outdoor sites and stands. Round table discussion. Bring a topic/question and share.

EIBA JULY Activities

July 10, 6:00 EIBA Board Mtg. Nothing But Noodles Restaurant on Collins.

July 17, 7 pm, EIBA Club Mtg. Pierson Flower Shop on Ellis Blvd.

Topics: Discussion of display prep for Bruce more show.

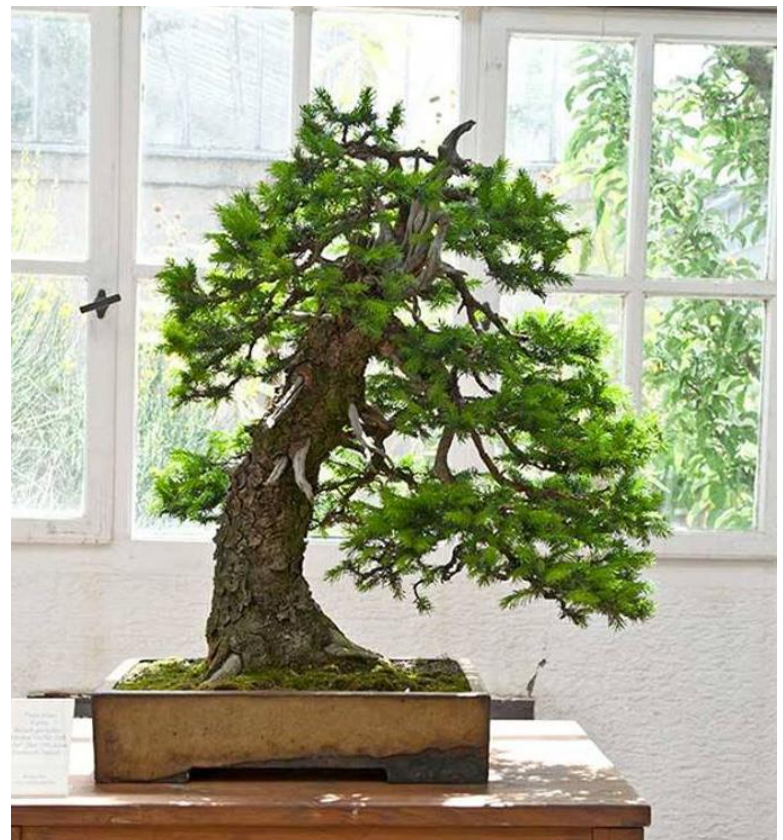
August 14, 6 pm, Board Mtg.

August 21, 7 pm, EIBA Club Mtg.

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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A naturalistic styled spruce by the godfather of naturalistic bonsai, Walter Pall, of Germany. Great pot by Gordon Duffet. The tree was collected in Italy in 1992.

"There is no such thing as perfection in [fill in the blank]...veterans learn continually from each other. ...Many an expert will travel great distances to watch another expert--and the true master is never satisfied. That's why he is a master."

-- from BLACK BASS AND THE FLY ROD

Timely Tips

Once again, the weather! Severe thunderstorms, high winds, overflowing rain gauges, and flooding. What's a poor bonsai collector to do? Managing 10 or less trees means you can likely bring them all inside if you have warning of approaching bad weather. But if you are away from home or have 10 – 100 bonsai, you are more at the mercy of the weather.

As we spend more money on trees and pots, we find we have to spend more on weather protection to insure our collection continues to exist. I used to only worry about winter care. Now I worry about too much wind, days on end of high heat, a fortnight of rain, and even hail. Last week I had a tree flip off a bench and snap 4 branches. I figure it will take four years to replace two of those branches. Please follow the weather more closely than I did and make sure you have adequate protections in place for bad weather.

Well, it is beautiful out today and the trees show signs that I fertilized them a couple of days ago. Maintain your fertilization program to keep your trees strong.

Fertilizer also grows weeds as well as leaves. I can barely keep up with pulling weeds. Don't let them get a deep hold or they are harder to pull completely out.

Keep your new growth in check, unless you have a branch or apex you want to grow out. Keeping your foliage shaped, thinned, cut back also means your trees will not catch as much wind and will be less likely to blow over. And more light gets to the inner tree.

If your tree is healthy, you can defoliate deciduous trees, though it is getting a bit late as there are fewer growing days left for them to recover. My defoliated Ficus have all popped fresh new leaves and look very happy. Prune while the leaves are off as you can see inside more easily.

Now is a good time to repot tropicals.

And keep a daily eye for pest or disease damage and react immediately. Enjoy your trees!

Back When Bonsai Was Big

By Ivan Hanthorn

I have spent the better part of two decades surveying historical Japanese woodblock prints for images in which bonsai are a part of the design field. I do not recall ever finding a portrayal of a true bonsai as large as that displayed in the accompanying image, in which the imperial size bonsai is a backdrop for a tea ceremony. The print by an unknown artist was recently put up for sale on the internet, where one can now find just about anything. Note the traditional deep decorated pot and the ancient bark; presumably the tree is an *ume*.



[Tea Time with Giant Bonsai] 14" x 9 ¾" Japanese woodblock. Unknown artist; collected mid-20th century in Japan.

Big Bonsai – Really Big Bonsai

By John Denny

Bonsai are beautiful little trees, right? Well, big can be amazing and beautiful, too!



This freshly defoliated monster Trident maple is by Juan Andrade. Three things jump right out about the Trident maple: its remarkably massive trunk, its excellent taper and delightful movement, especially for a large tree, as it wends its way up.

Below: a fabulous, massive quince with amazing multiple trunks, superb ramification/movement, and beautiful quince flowers, too.



Bonsai Soil Grooming

Ivan Hanthorn

Grooming the soil beneath the bonsai tree in the bonsai pot is something that should be done from time to time for health and appearance purposes, particularly in preparation for a show and in the fall before winter housing. For show purposes, it is more than a simple cleanup of the soil surface that is required to complement the tree. First do a cleanup of debris with tweezers and pull any weeds looking for a new home. Then, if the soil is to be left as is, press it down flat and even with a bonsai trowel followed up with a sweeping with a bonsai brush. There is an elegance to this simple beauty. Remember photos of Gandhi sitting on a swept dirt floor while spinning. Think about the essence of a Japanese rock garden, which is mostly groomed sand. If the soil is to be amended or resurfaced, then remember to do this troweling and sweeping as the last step of preparation after changes to the soil are completed.

Frequently at show time, bonsai exhibitors are inclined to spiff up the bonsai in all aspects, which includes not only oiling the pot, scrubbing the tree trunks, final wiring, sometimes oiling the tree trunks, and all of that picayune obsessiveness that one comes to know, but also dressing up the soil itself. The general bonsai potting soil is not always attractive in and of itself. So, so-called bonsai dressings are often applied. Over time these dressing materials usually get blown and washed away; they tend to also be expensive. But for short term attractiveness, bonsai soil dressings are truly delightful.

There are many dressing choices, but before reviewing those options it should be clearly noted that to apply a new layer of soil topping to the soil already in the pot means soil removal. Think of this as a variant on miniature road construction, with grading and leveling preceding final paving. Americans tend to skip this step in show preparation; rather they just keep piling all the additives on and think the final result is just so cute. It isn't. Take a look at Kokufu photographs. The soil line is essentially the pot rim line, without undulating landscaping.

Calculate the thickness of the dressing layer that will be added, which to a large degree depends on the particle size of the dressing material; then remove the necessary amount of bonsai soil to allow for this new layer of soil amendment without having the final soil noticeably above the pot line. Solidify this new subsoil surface with the troweling actions noted above, and then apply the new dressing evenly.

Most if not all commercially available bonsai dressings are natural or baked grit material, sometimes ground, always sifted. Natural water washed gravels usually have a very smooth surface. When polished or coated with acrylic they suggest a wet surface, although the shininess can be a distraction if the gravels are not used well. Some of the Japanese river sands are truly water washed but often still sharp edged particles. Volcanic and heat expanded shale and clay products have sharp edged surface structure. The variance between them is usually a simple matter of differences in color, texture, and "feel." Pick a dressing that feels right visually for the tree in a complementary sense and that helps complete the mood of the bonsai at the time of exhibit.

Common dressing choices Small size volcanic rock (less than ¼"D) in red, black, or a mix can be attractive, particularly with conifers. Small volcanic rock is sometimes labeled *scoria*, most often when surface

sourced in the American West. *Haydite*, an expanded shale product, is often best as a dressing rather than as a soil amendment; it too looks handsome with conifers. Other market terms for expanded shale include “expanded aggregate,” “expanded clay,” and “grow rock.” Black volcanic sand from Mount Fuji in Japan is available on the market and can be used as a soil amendment or dressing. I have used it for suggestions of water in a landscape. Shale, as is or heat expanded, can be an attractive gravel for surface dressing. Fine river gravels of North America that look like miniature pea gravel are often delightful, but hard to find when you want it. Fish aquarium suppliers can be a source for this and similar gravels. The shine factor can eliminate some of the coated gravels found in aquarium shops. High quality shohin soils can sometimes provide a very suitable bonsai surface dressing. *Dallas Bonsai* has long been an internet bonsai site at which to start a search for a dressing that pleases. Check the on-line catalog under both soil amendments and soil dressings. *Amazon* has become a source for everything. Amazon is a major outlet for the aggregate products of *Exotic Pebbles*, which vends small bags of polished rocks and glass in many colors. See the *Exotic Bean Pebbles* on Amazon. Two common and quite affordable aggregate products should not be over looked—red granite chicken grit, and *Turface*. Both can be quite attractive when groomed. To get just the right look, I have in the past even hiked to an Iowa river sandbank to get natural looking local material.

Moss If moss is to be used there are several considerations to be addressed. Complete lawn or patches here and there? One or more species of moss? Natural looking or wedding reception lawn party spiffy look? Begin this part of the preparation process by recognizing that most traditionalists consider moss a health hazard for bonsai, and therefore recommend not leaving moss on the soil during regular maintenance care. Thus moss would always be a temporary, artificial application process to achieve a “natural” presentation image of the bonsai. The challenge then is to use moss well if going to use it at all. It is certainly not required.

Moss in the bonsai pot needs to look naturally present. Set the moss down into, not on, the bonsai soil with its new surface dressing. Avoid the floating green island on a sea of mud look that is all too common. There are many different species of moss to utilize. Lichens also can be well used. But use them artfully. Better a single species of moss here and there than a collection of everything you have under the tree that should be the center of attention. Put the moss on well in advance of the show. If running late use Gary Wood’s approach—put down the moss, carefully brush in soil fines to ground the moss, then only mist when watering. In a couple of weeks’ time the moss will look like it really grew there. Farther ahead take Dave Lowman’s approach—tear the moss into tiny chunks and spread where desired, then cover with fines and mist. A really fine lawn of moss eventually develops.

The key to moss success is soil fines—the tiny aggregate material that gets sifted out of the bonsai soil components when preparing a classic Boon mix or something similar. A shallow bedding of this fine material under moss clumps will provide a constantly damp bed for the moss as it begins to take hold in its new location. A surface dusting with fines upon completion of the soil preparation work followed by a gentle misting will help set the composition. Do not disturb except with misting and the bonsai will appear “natural” at show.

Look at the “soil” topping in the following bonsai presentation photographs.



Japanese Maple, Harry Harrington, UK. Note the moss while covering the pot's soil mass has natural breaks in it rather than being a blanket. Note the soil line, rising very gently above the pot rim with a slight drop to the soil just at the inside of the rim.



*California Buckeye, Bay Area Bonsai Associates Annual Show 2011
Moss in clumps with gravel dressing showing as underlay.*



*Toringo Crabapple, Japanese Collection, National Bonsai & Penjing Museum
Red volcanic stone only for soil dressing.*



Fuji Sand (black volcanic stone), currently available in grit sizes 1.1–25mm from various Midwestern bonsai suppliers

Bonsai Smart: How to Create a Twisted Juniper Trunk

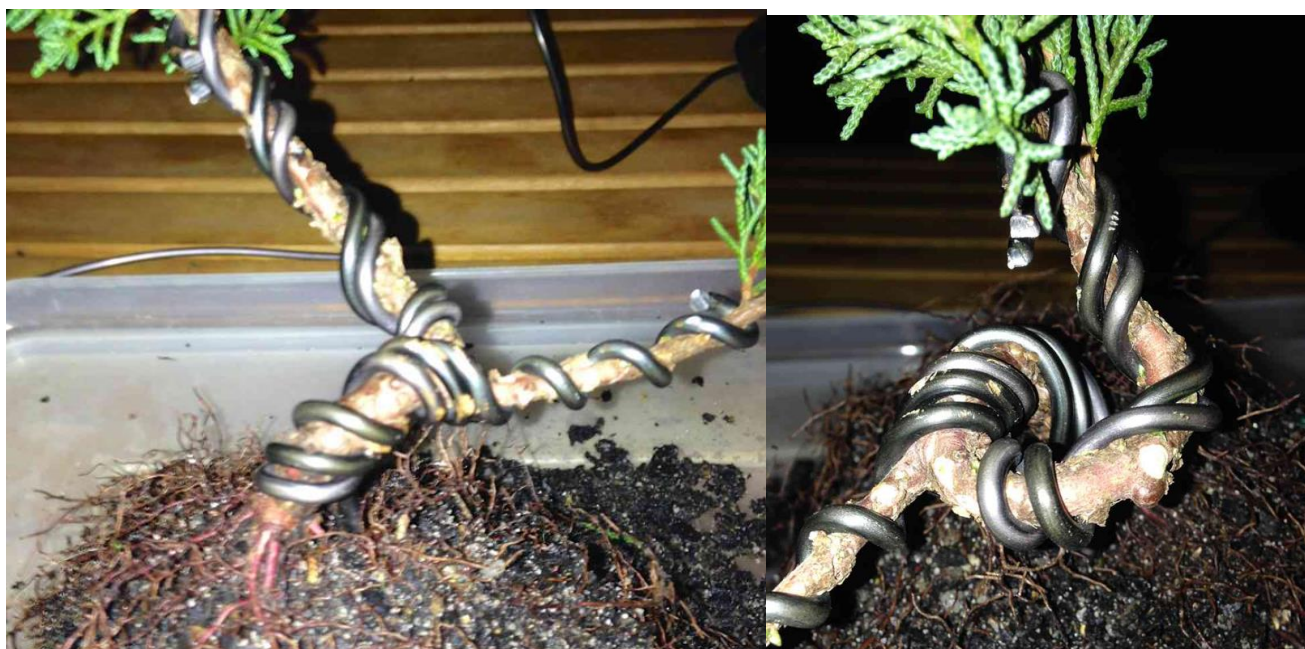
By John Denny (photos from Tiny Trident Bonsai)

Do you admire yamadori (collected) junipers with their turning, twisting trunk, commonly with interesting shari? Often the admiration ends when you open your wallet and find that you cannot afford the price tag. Do not despair! You can create your own twisted trunk juniper. As photos are worth a lot of my words, I will write sparsely and ask that you learn from the photos.



Young Shimpaku from 1 gallon container.

Lower foliage removed and wired.



First bend is on lower trunk. Use two pair pliers to grasp wire.

Looking from above, next bend just above first branch.



Now a bend in the first branch has been made.



Here is the tree after the initial bending. Additional bends can be added in the future. Remove the wire once it begins to firmly cut into the trunk.

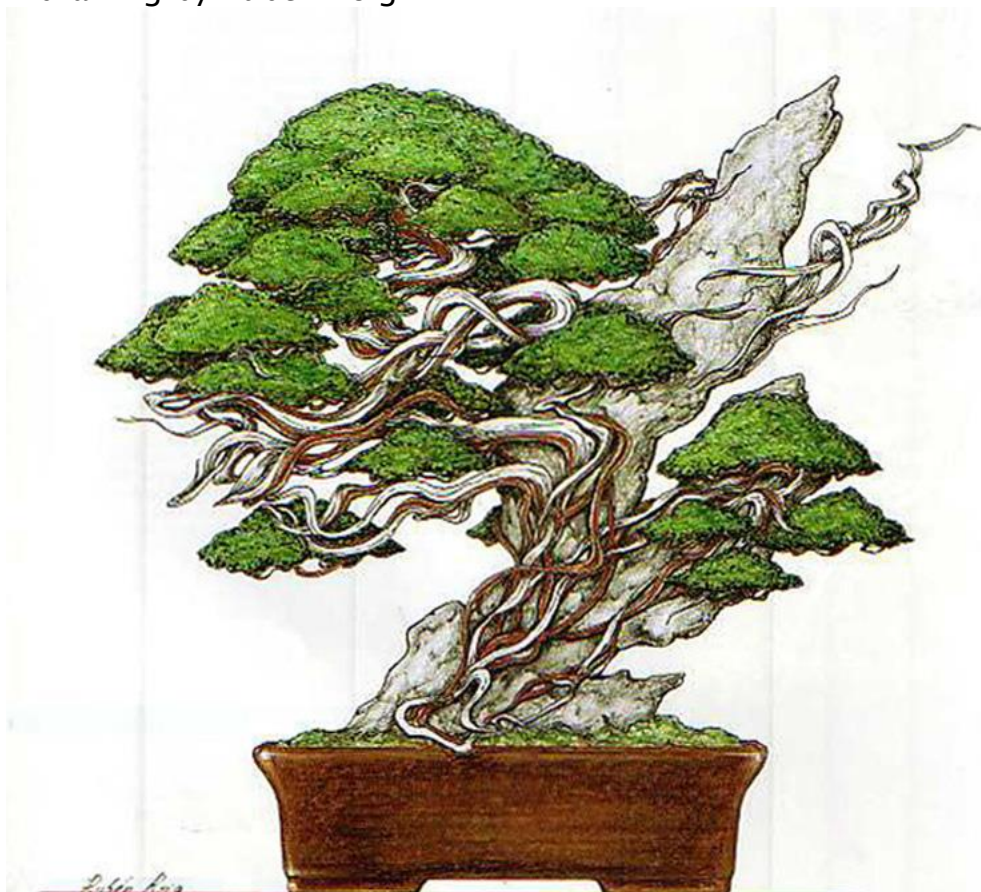
You Had to Be There! (or, to put it more mundanely, Knowing Your Growth Hormone)

Ivan Hanthorn

I was in possession of some very healthy cuttings from a bonsai I had thinned and trimmed, cuttings which would be foolish to waste. So I decided to root them. Problem—where is the rooting hormone when I need it? So off to any logical local source that would carry a common gardening product. As luck would have it, every business I stopped at was either out of stock or closed. I ended at a friendly all-purpose hardware store that has a gardening aisle. Approached by a clerk just bursting with helpfulness, I asked if the store carried rooting hormone. Dead silence. Facial contortions as the thought rumbled around up there. Clearly, I had stumped the man. So he walked over to the appropriate shelf and said: “Do you mean this”, and put his hand on a container of Stump Remover. I politely told him I was in search of a product that encouraged life rather than ending it.

Lest anyone else be unaware, rooting hormone lends a much greater certainty to outcomes when striking cuttings or air layering. Today the essential ingredient is indole-3 butyric acid, a plant hormone in the auxin family. It is available as a powder, a dissolvable salt, or a solution which you dilute to the appropriate degree. The favored solution with serious bonsaiists is marketed under the brand *Dip N Grow Liquid Rooting Concentrate*. There are multiple brands available of the powder form. You can also make your own growth hormone with willow twigs if you want to take the Boy Scout approach. Instructions are on the internet.

A drawing by Ruben Roig





Goshin by John Naka. This famous bonsai resides at the [National Bonsai and Penjing Museum](#) in Washington DC. Photos will never do it justice. It is huge (about 1 meter tall – just over 3 feet) and is so dramatic in person that it almost seems to vibrate with power. They are celebrating what would be John Naka's 100th birthday this year.