

*IBA News & Muse*  
*Iowa Bonsai Association Newsletter*  
**MARCH 2014**

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## IBA MARCH Activities

**MARCH 18, 7 PM, IBA MEETING**

*Des Moines Botanical Garden*

*Topics: Who Knows? The Board of Directors had a meeting to formalize the program schedule for the year but it has not been distributed. Before the meeting date expect to receive it as an email from our President.*

## EIBA MARCH Activities

March 13, 6 pm. Board meeting at Nothing But Noodles restaurant on Collins.

*Discussion topics include summer picnic, soil inventory, March club meeting presentation topic.*

March 20, 7 pm. Club meeting at Pierson Flower Shop on Ellis Blvd.

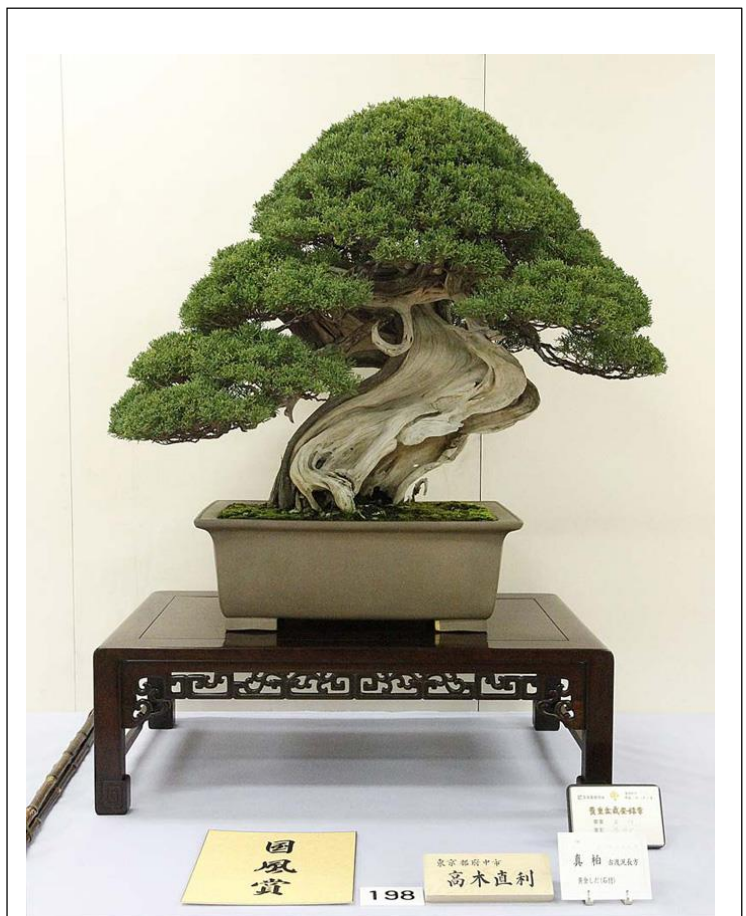
*Agenda includes repotting. Bring a tree to repot. Also, pick up soil and pay club dues.*

March 22. Bonsai Presentation at McGowan House, Marion.

*Chris Burr will offer a presentation on Bonsai at this Gallery that sells art by Iowan artists.*

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*Kokufu 2012 award winner – Shimpaku juniper. Impressive, powerful deadwood.*

## Timely Tips

Wow! The temperature was above freezing today. The days are definitely longer and I have seen a hint of new buds on one of my deciduous trees. That is a sure sign repotting time is at hand. My fingers have been itching to get started. Deciduous trees are the first to show signs of growth so are usually the first to be repotted.

Take your time repotting, don't rush. Use care to remove the tree safely from the pot. Unwind the overgrown roots and remove them. Carefully remove old soil and comb out the roots. Prune large unnecessary roots. Use well draining soil. Make sure you are happy with the placement of the tree. Find the best front AND the best inclination. Show off the thickest part of the trunk, the best nebari, the nicest movement. Hide defects as best you can. Place the tree on a small pile of soil so it is not sitting directly on the bottom of the pot. The next step is to tie it in securely with wire. It is important the tree not move when buffeted by spring winds, so the fine new roots are not torn and broken.

Work the soil around the roots carefully by lightly wiggling a chopstick in the soil. Don't jab with the stick or you can break the roots. On deciduous trees, I generally cover the soil surface close to the trunk with sphagnum moss run over a coarse screen. This will help keep the soil above the vulnerable new roots moist. Water the newly potted tree well until clear water runs out the bottom. That will get rid of dust and small particles and allow for oxygen to get to the roots. Put the tree in a protected place and mist it frequently.

A key part of repotting success is aftercare. It may be a while before we can put our trees outside, so introduce trees to sun gradually so you don't burn foliage. Keep newly potted trees out of the wind until new roots have grown. Also, watch outside temps. Avoid freezing temps by bringing newly potted trees back inside or covering them. And watch for sudden warm days. I once lost a couple nice smaller freshly potted trees when I left town for a day and April temps hit low 80s with very high winds.

Oh, yeah. Don't leave town!

## Bonsai Smart: Getting the Most Out of Workshops

By John Denny

Workshops are a great (and fun) way to learn bonsai. But they cost money so let's talk about how to get the most out of a workshop. First, consider what stage you are at as a bonsai student – longtime expert, complete rookie or somewhere in between. Rookies should not waste their money on a high level workshop or one featuring a \$600 tree. Pick a workshop at your level.

What does the workshop offer – great material? working with a specific species like azalea? a great teacher you have wanted to learn from? or will it teach you a specific style or technique like root over rock or forest creation or how to create deadwood? Know what you want.

If it is a "bring your own material" workshop, do you have a tree that is appropriate to the level of the teacher? Don't have an international expert work on your \$12 procumbans. Understand the level of your workshop leader. Is she a local, regional or national expert?

Know what you want to learn. Come prepared with questions relevant to your workshop tree species, or techniques, or aftercare, or future styling for your tree down the road. Ask questions, but be respectful of your teacher's time. They have a lot of pressure to help everyone finish on time. Be prepared for when your teacher comes around the table to you. If he asked that you clean the tree and expose the nebari so you can find a good front, have it done when he returns. Don't make your teacher do all the work. Get dirty.

Come prepared with the right tools, wire, soils, pots, supplies. This gives your teacher the best chance of helping you learn and giving you the best tree he can. And last, have fun! Talk to your neighbors. Don't be nervous. You will make a mistake or botch a task. Your teacher will clean it up and you will learn from it!

## PENJING—I'VE GOT YOU UNDER MY SKIN (Part II)

By Ivan Hanthorn

*This article is a continuation from a piece that began in the last issue of this newsletter.*

There are three major types of penjing, but only the first, tree penjing, is directly equivalent to bonsai. Penjing is a much larger universe than bonsai, for in its simplest classical schemata, there are two other forms—landscape penjing, and land-and-water penjing. *Saikai*, a post-WWII Japanese development, is a rough equivalent to landscape penjing, but they do look different from each other for a number of reasons, including the pots or trays used. *Saikai* just looks Japanese, and landscape penjing looks so Chinese. *Saikai* also has a much shorter history than landscape penjing. Land-and-water penjing has no equivalent in Japan. Even with viewing stones, they are presented in much different fashion than the land-and-water form.

The landscape and land-and-water penjing forms are now broadly recognized as penjing and as very Chinese. It is the tree penjing that causes the general public and bonsai aficionados some confusion. First of all, when Chinese as well as non-Chinese discuss tree penjing, they frequently call them bonsai. Yet tree penjing and bonsai reflect different aesthetic principles. Even when correctly labeled, the differences are not always obvious. The tree penjing that look like failed bonsai are the greatest challenge to those who know only bonsai and not penjing also. So, in very simplistic terms, what are the essential differences?

Following are some of the most outstanding areas of possible differentiation. Trunk taper may be much less noticeable in Chinese penjing. Nebari may be minimal or even lacking. Trees often seem to just spring up out of the ground in penjing. Roots are often wrapped around the base of the tree trunk to suggest a dragon, which just curls the hair of some bonsai enthusiasts. Lots of exposed roots, dead and alive, can be present on penjing. The sense of spacing is different in penjing, with much less focus on minimalism than in bonsai. Finish may seem rougher on penjing than on bonsai. All of these characteristics reflect a fundamental difference in intent. Principally, the Chinese penjing is reflecting the spirit of the imagined scene; the Japanese bonsai is reflecting the perfectly executed iconic abstraction of the type or place suggested by the bonsai. Tree penjing will tend to be more vertical in form than bonsai. Penjing is less bound by rules than bonsai. Inspiration rather than rule book allows avoidance of “cookie cutter” results. Pot options are different and even greater in penjing. Penjing are emotional in nature; bonsai are perfectionist paradigm expressions of nature.

There is so much more that could be said in discussing differences, but that becomes a rather academic discourse. My intent here is to state some of the obvious things one quickly notices when comparing. A much greater understanding comes from looking at as many examples of each as possible. The internet is very helpful in this regard. Simply Google “penjing images” for a start.

The white marble tray that is so typical of many landscape and land-and-water penjing today is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century development. In and of itself it declares “penjing.” Darker suibans or even rock slabs were predecessors and are still a very acceptable options.

What is the advantage of becoming more familiar with penjing forms and aesthetics? First of all it broadens one's understanding of bonsai history and the characteristics of bonsai that make it what it is. One also sees greater possibilities for developing complex landscapes. Perhaps most delightful is that one gains an option for plant material that just does not have what is needed to develop a good bonsai. The same tree may have features that could be useful in a penjing development, either as a single tree penjing or in a group in a landscape penjing.

And penjing can be really fun to pursue. Knowledge and practice of bonsai and penjing can enrich and inform the appreciation of each. The work of Robert Steven shows how a thorough understanding of each can be utilized in making enthralling hybrid forms.

I have some landscape groups in development for penjing. I have become a bit compulsive about carrying home rocks when I travel that might be useful in a landscape penjing. And I am toying with some penjing feeling literati. Just what I needed (and wanted)—another passion!

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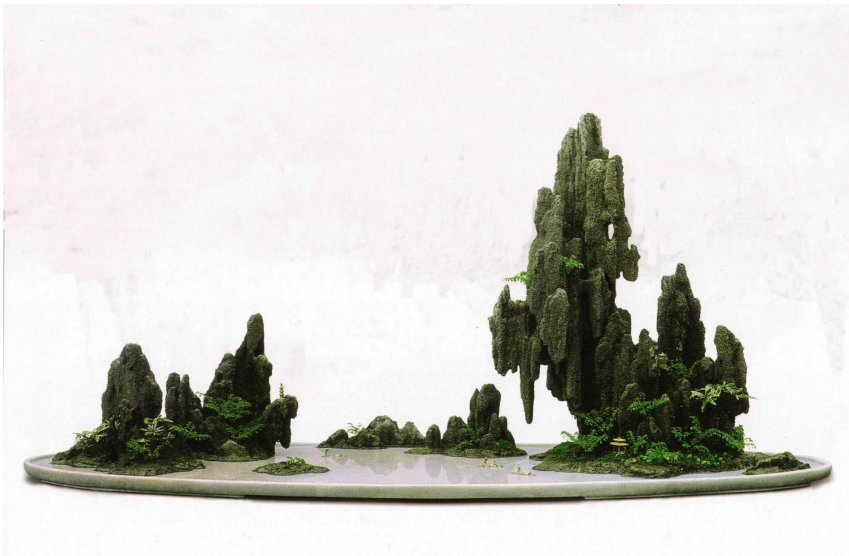




*Pot Penjing with miniature figurines, two officials or scholars playing a game of dice. The tree has a wild but expressive shape. The pot is probably from KUANGCHOU in the province of Kwangtung, about 80 years old and hasn't aged very much.*



*Land-and-Water Penjing by penjing master Zhao Qing Quan. Landscape and water dominate, not trees. Rocks are a major component.*



*Land-and-Water Penjing by penjing master Zhao Qing Quan.*

*Trees not required in this style.*

## Random Notes from Ryan Neil



Ryan Neil is an American bonsai artist who studied with Kimura in Japan for 6 years. Kimura is considered the greatest bonsai master in the world. Ryan has been back in the US for 4 years where he runs his nursery in Oregon. He gives lectures and demonstration worldwide. After viewing one of his demos on YouTube, I thought I would share some of his bonsai advice and wide ranging comments. Ryan is good with details, but I found his big picture philosophy on art and bonsai styling of great interest. Ryan worked on a Ponderosa Pine for this demo.

“To gain drama, Kimura pushed branch bending to the limit. How did he get away with it? Great technique? No, better aftercare! Healing the inevitable cracks and stress that occur is critical.

When should you break bonsai rules? When a major aspect of the tree tells you to! That aspect you then want to feature. It is hard to remember a tree that followed all the rules. But, you easily recall the ones that don't follow every rule. You don't break rules willy nilly or because it is the easy way out. Art can overrule guidelines. But, don't over think bonsai. Usually while I am wiring, I am just thinking, “How can I make this tree look more bad ass!” (much laughter).

Green growth and tree health are not the same. Good tree health means the tree is better able to show resistance to pests, temperature extremes, wind, etc. You get good tree health from good soil, proper watering, proper fertilizing. Never bud trim a Ponderosa as some experts suggest. Instead work to improve overall health and strength and this will in turn create good back budding and nice evenly divided strength (energy) on the tree.

To achieve small needle growth (ie on a Ponderosa) you want to create more foliage to help spread energy to more needles. More needles means less energy will be sent to any given set of needles, thus reducing length. Try not to force a tree to do something if you can find a natural way to do it within the normal growth habits of the tree. Every time you touch a tree, do your best to make your tree the very best looking you can. Over time, it works.

If you take watering for granted, it will come back to bite you. When you are watering a tree, you are never closer to knowing that tree! Pay attention to every aspect of your tree while watering.”

## Tips and Techniques: Bjorn Bjorholm

(from ABS March newsletter)

As winter is finally winding down (in most places anyway), repotting season is getting ready to start for a majority of us in the US. In this article, we'll take a look at proper soil components and watering habits for bonsai.

Nearly everywhere I travel, it seems that everyone has his or her own recipe for soil. Typically, most people tend to choose their soil mixtures based on personal time constraints – ie for those who are busy with work and family obligations, watering on a regular, frequent basis is often difficult, so soil components that retain more moisture are quite often seen as the best compromise in these situations. These elements range from fine river sand to peat to ground up organic bark. While it may be true these components retain water better than heavier grain, inorganic elements such as lava and pumice, are they really the best choice for the long term health and maintenance of our bonsai?

Branch growth and root growth are really reflective of one another – a healthy root system will be reflected by healthy top growth, and vice versa. The question then becomes, what can we do to encourage healthy root production in our bonsai? Well, in natural environments, what is it that roots have evolved to do? The answer is simple – search for water and nutrients in the surrounding soil (or rock bed, or bog, etc.). In container culture, the function of roots does not change. In order to encourage more rapid root growth, we need to provide an environment that is conducive to this goal.

In Japan (and now in many parts of the US) soil mixtures have been standardized to include three or four simple components mixed in various ratios. These include akadama, crushed lava rock, pumice, and/or large particle sand. Of these elements, akadama is used as the water retention component, while the others are used to create a porous, free draining environment. The idea is that by allowing the soil to dry out more rapidly, trees will naturally send out more roots in search of moisture. Our job is to then quench this soil with water on a more frequent basis so as to keep the new feeder roots alive and healthy. This continual process of rapid drying out and frequent quenching is what produces fine, healthy root systems and in turn better foliar growth. Soil mixes that contain higher percentages of fine, organic components such as bark and peat will provide a growing environment counter-productive to our developmental goals. Yes, these mixtures hold more moisture, making watering an easier process because the soil dries out less often. But if the soil remains wetter for longer, roots are not being actively encouraged to grow, which will be reflected by poor foliar growth. The main point here is that rather than adjusting the soil components to fit our daily watering routine, we should really adjust our watering habits and adopt this standardized potting medium. Of course, for most folks this seems almost impossible – coming home from work in the middle of the day just to water is out of the question. But here's where we can find a compromise.

In the spring as leaves begin to appear, trees start sucking up more and more water, and as the temperatures



heat up, this trend continues into the summer. For us in Japan, this means watering frequency increases to two to four times per day depending on the plant (and the weather, and a large number of variables).

Since checking four times each day is impossible for nearly everyone, what is the next best option? Since we've established that free draining, porous soil mixtures are more suited for better health and development, we can say that watering twice per day in good soil is much better than watering once per day in poor draining mix. So here's the compromise – get rid of the fine organics, use the free-draining mix, wake up a few extra minutes earlier in the morning and heavily water all of your bonsai. In the evenings after work and other obligations are finished, check all of your trees and water those that have dried out during the day once more.

This approach, of course, is not entirely optimal, but by using better soil and adjusting your watering habits in this manner, you will help improve the overall health, and speed up the development, of your bonsai. This is one compromise that will make a huge difference in the health and growth of your material in a single growing season. Experiment this year with this approach and compare the results. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised.

*Bjorn Bjorholm patiently wiring a large white pine in Japan.*

