

Iowa Bonsai Association Newsletter

www.iabonsai.org

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

May 2017

Volume 47, Issue 5



IBA May Activities

June 17, 9:00 AM, Open Study Group and Presentation at 11:30 AM

We'll be working on the Terrace, weather permitting.

IBA Meetings at The Greater, Des Moines Botanical Garden. 909 Robert D. Ray Drive

Topics: 11:30 Presentations: Defoliation by Scott Allen, Formal Display by Larry Totton and De-candling Black Pine by Ron Heinen

EIBA June Activities

June 8, 6:30 PM, EIBA Board Meeting at Panera Restaurant on Edgewood Road

Topics: Picnic prep, July Club mtg. prep.

June 24, Noon to 4:00 PM, Annual Picnic, Guthridge Park Green Pavillion

Topic: Dave Lowman will be vending, so come pick up trees, pots, tools, books.

MABA holds the 2017 Convention in Indianapolis, see info on the top of Page 2.

Iowa State Fair Bonsai Show, August 13th.

ENTER BY, JULY 1

(LATE ENTRIES ACCEPTED UNTIL JULY 8 – MUST PAY A LATE FEE).

Inside This Issue

IBA Activites	1
EIBA Activites	1
Why Go to a Bonsai Convention,	1-2
Bjorn Bjorholm Workshop	3-4
Wabi-Sabi and the Japanese Aesthetic	4-5
Kusamono	6

Why Go to a Bonsai Convention, Anyway?

*A message from Steve Moore
Past MABA Vice-President*

Late last year, I started talking up the MABA2010 convention, trying to persuade as many as possible of our local members to attend. A question from one lady stopped me in my tracks for a moment. The gist was: I don't have much bonsai experience; wouldn't things at a convention be over my head? So what point would there be to my going?

That rocked me a bit! As I considered her question, I realized that I had not mentioned the great difference my own first convention made to me. My first bonsai convention resulted in a "quantum leap" in my bonsai knowledge, enjoyment, and confidence. (I really don't like clichés, but occasionally a cliché does actually say it best.)

The first convention I attended was the 1992 American Bonsai Society Symposium, hosted by the Susquehanna Bonsai Society and held in Hershey, PA. Even though I had acquired my first tree (a serissa) 2-1/2 years before, I was still very much a beginner, learning as best I could from books and journals. My work schedule at the time kept me from involvement in any bonsai club. How did the symposium result in a "quantum leap?" Let me give you some specifics.



First, learning, learning, learning! Opportunities to learn were all around me:

Demonstrations. I saw Bruce Baker, of Ann Arbor, MI, start out with an unkempt-looking collected yew that I, frankly, thought was quite boring, and transform it into a masterpiece. The work took two days, most of it off in a side room; but when Bruce was finished I was very much impressed by the result! I learned how a potter creates an oval pot on a round potter's wheel by watching Max Braverman do it. (He threw a round pot, then cut a leaf-shaped section out of the center and carefully squeezed the sides in to close the gap.) And I grasped some techniques that I had not yet understood from reading, by seeing them done. Workshops are of course an excellent chance to learn, as many of you already know. I didn't take any in Hershey, but I was a silent observer in one or two, and even observing I learned quite a bit.

Exhibit Critiques. I took one critique at ABS '92, and have been convinced of their value ever since! Vaughn Banting, of New Orleans, led a dozen of us through

the convention exhibit, explaining what he found good and not-so-good about each tree. I know I learned more in that one hour than in any other four hours that weekend! Vaughn, by the way, had an encouraging way of referring to a bonsai's "dilemmas" rather than its "problems."

Private conversations. Within half an hour of checking in I found myself welcomed to listen in as a serissa's owner discussed design options with a teacher. Several times during the weekend I stopped one teacher or another in the hall, to ask (politely) if he would mind answering a question. My questions then were kindergarten level, but only one man blew me off. Vaughn Banting was the most helpful of all. After courteously listening to a design dilemma that had me stumped, Vaughn sat down with me on a nearby bench. Taking the pad on which I'd sketched out my problem, he in turn sketched a simple, fairly elegant solution, which was well within my abilities at the time. When I protested that his suggestion broke a basic design rule, he explained that this was a valid exception. ("A major branch may cross the trunk, if the tree is a windswept.") It has always seemed to me that the best way to show my appreciation for the helpfulness of Vaughn, and others, is by passing it on. Vaughn died in October 2008, and since then it has also seemed the best way to honor his memory.

Second, inspiration! Pictures can be very useful, but nothing compares with being able to see a bonsai directly: you can look at it from different angles, from closer or farther away; you can see more detail, more nuance. I went through the bonsai exhibit in Hershey at least three times by myself, studying the trees, finding new details, new insights. Several times I bent down to put my eyes about at the level of the nebari, and looked up into the branch structure. Sometime during ABS '92, I'm sure, is when I started saying to myself, "I didn't know you could do that," in mingled surprise and delight. After 18 years, I still say it from time to time.

What sorts of insights can you gain from studying good bonsai?

Species. Would you expect English ivy, or giant sequoia, to make a good bonsai? A convention display is a good place to expand your horizons about species you may not have considered before.

Style and color matches. Sometimes we don't realize that a certain style will work well for a given species, until we see an example. The same is true for pot colors and the foliage, fruit, or bark of different trees. Ways to handle dilemmas. One of the trees in the Hershey exhibit had a major trunk-chop wound that was far from being completely closed. The artist put the wound to the rear, and grew a new leader directly in front of it, to conceal it. It was the first time I had seen that. Seeing how others have handled design dilemmas can give us ideas for dealing with the challenges our own trees present.

Third, community. This benefit is intangible, but it is very real. Paul Weishaar, President of MABA, approaches this concept from an angle that hadn't occurred to me, in his current "President's Message." Rather than appear to compete with him, I'll just ask you to read his second paragraph, beginning with, "As I write this I cannot help but think of our bonsai community ..." (President's Message shown below.) Finally, let me leave you with a 9-year-old's perspective. I asked my daughter what she would say on this point, as I was getting ready to write. I'll quote her answer as closely as I can: When you go to a convention, you learn a lot about bonsai, and then you find you have a hobby that you will enjoy for the rest of your life! Steve Moore, MABA Vice-President; Warsaw, IN Fort Wayne Bonsai Club

Bjorn Bjorholm Workshop

John Denny

IBA organized a workshop in May with Bjorn Bjorholm. Bjorn is a fine young man with a growing reputation as an excellent bonsai artist and a very good teacher. I first met Bjorn at Brussels Bonsai Rendezvous a few years ago. He grew up in TN. I met his parents and found out his father grew up in western Iowa.

Bjorn earned a degree in Economics and then took a detour to Japan where he apprenticed, married and has lived for 9 years. He is planning to move back to TN next year and begin his own bonsai nursery. I am sure he will do very well.

Bjorn is quite an accomplished videographer and has



many, many videos on YouTube. He also has a couple of Bonsai Courses available through Bonsai Empire. I can vouch for the Intermediate one. Lots of good information.

The workshop was held at the Magruder farm. I arrived with two trees that I had first worked on with Bjorn while at Brussels. The first was a large Prostrata juniper and the other was a small, not quite shohin sized white pine.

Helene Magruder's studio was full when I arrived. Full of very good bonsai material and I felt the energy and excitement of the IBA participants. Bjorn had just begun his first pass around the group discussing each tree and what he and the owner hoped to accomplish with their tree over the day. There were collected trees, a nice tropical tree, junipers, and pines including Helene's



Helene Magruder working on her beautiful large white pine which is headed for a show.

great white pine which she was readying for a show. Bjorn worked with each person at their own level, seamlessly moving from one task to another. He widened some shari on my tree and carved new shari on the next, then helped wire the following tree, the next

he discussed styling, the next added raffia, wired some more larger branches placing them in more dynamic positions, he guy wired branches, and left each student



Ron Heinen sharpening a tool prior to attacking his tree!

with a task to do while he continued around the room, always teaching, always working, often quietly telling stories of bonsai or life in Japan. It was fun to see the



Helene's White Pine ready for the show. Good luck, Helene!

trees, each and every one, improve as the day went on. After a pleasant lunch break, Bjorn focused more on setting finer branches. Every tree came away vastly improved. And each student came away with more knowledge and experience. I have been to a lot of workshops, but I enjoyed this one as much as any. It was relaxed, but Bjorn kept things moving. And the IBA participants were a great group. I always say, bonsai friends are the best friends. Proven once again. A great IBA bonsai day!

Wabi-Sabi and the Japanese Aesthetic

John Denny

Most bonsai enthusiasts have heard the term wabi-sabi, but few can describe it accurately. I do not claim to be a cultural expert, nor an artist. But, I will take a crack at it using the descriptions of bonsai teachers who have apprenticed in Japan (Ryan Neil, Bjorn Bjorholm, Michael Hagedorn, Peter Tea, Owen Reich, Matt Reel). They have studied bonsai with Japanese teachers and worked and lived in an environment that is heavily influenced by a long history of wabi-sabi and the Japanese aesthetic.

Current world view often focuses on what is flashy, glitzy, attention grabbing almost against your own will. In contrast, the Japanese aesthetic is about internal values versus outward appearance.

But, we cannot always easily see things that are truly valuable. Appearances can and do fool us every day, right? We have all fallen victim to this scenario.

In Japanese history, an aesthetic revelation began within the tea ceremony, a ceremony very important in both Chinese and Japanese life. At one time the Japanese tea ceremony looked like the ancient Chinese tea ceremony. It was gaudy and featured the fanciest tea utensils. The utensils and the ceremony almost “called out” for you to notice them. It was a very visual ceremony.

In 1450 a Japanese monk started an aesthetic revolution

that changed the Japanese Tea Ceremony and Japanese arts (like bonsai) in general. Forever. The monk began bringing the most simple tea utensils to the ceremony. They were simple, rustic, plain. The idea was not to

look at the beauty of the utensils, but to see and feel the ordinary and unassuming nature of them. Doing this gave them a different sense of time, changing the focus from the moment, to a much longer sense of time and the passage of time, and the value of time. It also gave a sense of place and history, and a sense of who we are. This was the beginning of Wabi-Sabi. Wabi-Sabi is less about what something looks like and more about what you “feel”. This brought about a true revolution of values, a set of values the Japanese have preserved to this day.

How can we use wabi-sabi? How can we recognize it?
How can we learn to use it in creating good bonsai?

Wabi-sabi is hard to understand with our intellect. It is hard to define in English words. Wabi-sabi does not really have form. It is, instead, something we “feel”. The best bonsai speak beyond what we see. Perhaps they speak of the great natural universe or of a human experience or of a struggle in life, or of a yearning for something beyond the tree itself. Wabi-sabi and bonsai can speak of the passage of time, of the great ordering of nature and a sense of where we fit in this grand order. It gives us a connection to the universe.

When I spent time with Michael Hagedorn at his very first Seasonal, he used some Japanese words that I didn’t understand at first. He would look at a tree and exclaim, “Ahhh, aji!”. Here are some of the words he used that are related to wabi=sabi and the Japanese aesthetic:

“wabi” – humble, simple, non materialistic,

“sabi” – rustic, weathered, silvered by time, faded

“wabi-sabi” – quiet, ephemeral, transient, imperfection, ongoing, old

Additional descriptions of the feeling wabi-sabi gives us: not decorative, not flashy, does not use modern materials like plastic, glass or steel, not overly expensive, often materials seem valueless, colors are often earthy, murky hues.

“shibue” – quiet, reserved, subtle elegance

“yuugen” – something obscured, veiled, this can be a trunk partially hidden by carefully placed foliage or many features of a Japanese garden are hidden around a turn in

the path or the view of a feature is partially obscured by shrubs or trees.

Hagedorn tells the story “Seeing from a far distance, a hut near the top of a mountain. It causes you to feel a yearning. That is wabi. You hike the path to the top and find an old hut that has been weathered. That is “sabi:. You enter and see the furniture is quiet and reserved giving you an elegant feeling. That is shibue. Then you turn and look out a window and you see the moon. And you notice the window has not been cleaned in a very long time. so the moon is partly obscured. This is yuugen.

Here are a few more words I have heard Michael use, that he learned during his apprenticeship with Shinji Suzuki.: No need to learn the words themselves, but knowing the ideas is quite helpful in appreciating good bonsai.

“ubu” – fresh, untouched, for example a tree with great deadwood that has never been touched by tools

“aji” – savor, for example a tree with a long lasting visual appeal, you can look at the tree for many minutes and your appreciation just goes on and on. You can look at this tree again and again, never tiring of viewing it. In tasting a great wine, the “finish” of the wine goes on for many seconds after you have swallowed. The appreciation transcends the moment. Music, paintings, ceramics can all have aji. Now, we understand what Michael was experiencing as he viewed those trees and quietly said, “Ahh, aji!” and then continued to look at the tree for an extended time.

“ohshare” – elegant, an example might be a tree with a thin, lean trunk. Less is more.

“ke no gei: - aesthetic beauty, a tree with all aspects of great beauty

Knowing these words will allow us to:

- 1) Select better bonsai material
- 2) Make better decisions to use or not use appropriate bonsai techniques to improve the tree or leave it in its natural state of beauty.
- 3) Better appreciate the elegance and beauty of great bonsai trees, whether in your garden, in a good photo, or at a bonsai exhibition. Keep these new words and concepts in your head as you view trees, as well as any art or music, and you will enhance your enjoyment and understanding.

Kusamono

John Denny

Kusamono (literally “grass thing”) and shitakusa (literally “undergrass”) are a potted collection of plants designed to be viewed either in accompaniment with bonsai or alone. Normally, the term kusamono is used when the planting is displayed as the center of attention, while the term shitakusa is used for plantings that accompany bonsai displays. In contrast to underplantings (which are potted in with the bonsai), kusamono and shitakusa are displayed separately in special pots, driftwood, or even stones.

Plants used are typically moss, grass, lichen, small flowers, bamboo, or bulbs, that may heighten the beauty or reflect a certain season. While traditionally in Japan, plants gathered from mountains contributed to the bulk companion plantings, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Companion_planting, modern use has extended to more creative and artistic design.

In May, Bill Englert of the EIBA, demonstrated the creation of kusamono. See his work in the photos to the right. Test your creative side and give one a try yourself. Nice job, Bill!

Timely Tips

John Denny

Trees have been growing hard this month. We have had plenty of rain, wind, and cool temperatures. What should we be paying attention to this month?

Tropicals – I have put my tropicals out for a few days, but pulled them back in due to cold night temps. Get them sunshine as soon as you can. Hopefully, we can

put them out for the summer by end of May. Tropicals can be fertilized as they will begin to grow hard soon. Most tropicals will require annual repotting in mid-summer each year. Plan for it.

Pines – hold off on fertilizing until after candling and the new shoots have begun to harden off. If you have pines in the growth stage, go ahead and fertilize. Candling usually happens in early June locally. After the new needles come out, you can spray for needle cast.

Deciduous trees have been growing hard in May. Most of our trees we are growing trunk and branch thickness, so you can fertilize. Your leaves may get bigger, but if you are after trunk size, this is not an issue. If your tree is getting closer to a finished tree, then you likely will want to cut twigs back to 2, 3, or 4 leaves. This cleans the profile, but it also importantly lets light and air into the interior of the tree and encourages new buds. Begin watching for insects or signs of disease. Keep an eye on wind burn, too, especially as the temps will heat up. Wind and heat are tough on little trees.

Junipers – I feed junipers pretty hard all year. Keep them trimmed. It is easy to remove foliage from the crotches of

branches and also remove foliage growing downward from branches. Watch for mites and signs of disease.

Enjoy your trees this time of year. The vibrant green colors are inspiring after a long winter.

