

IBA News & Muse
Iowa Bonsai Association Newsletter
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IBA MARCH Activities

IBA MARCH EVENTS

Tuesday, March 17, 7:00pm, IBA Meeting
Des Moines Botanical Garden, 909 Robert D. Ray Drive,
Walsh Room

*Last month the Botanical Garden shut the power off the day our meeting was scheduled. So this month we will attempt to do two programs instead of one as originally planned. **Ivan Hanthorn** will lead a discussion on **Pot Selection**. Members are asked to bring a tree or a photo and measurements to explore the possibilities of the best pot for the tree. Bring your project tree. Find out sources for pots. **Helene Magruder** will lead a discussion of **Pest Control**. No hazmat suits required.*

EIBA MARCH Activities

March 12, 2015 6 pm Nothing But Noodles Restaurant.

March 19, 2015 7 pm Club Meeting at Pierson's Flower Shop on Ellis Blvd

*Topics: Hand out club soil, discuss Repotting. **Gary Wood** will be on hand to demonstrate good potting technique.*

My folks came to the U.S. as immigrants, aliens, and became citizens. I was born in Boston, a citizen, went to Hollywood and became an alien.

Leonard Nimoy

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A beautiful little Trident maple in very early spring. Below is a Hall's crabapple.



Timely Tips

Oh, my goodness! After a long cold February, it finally feels like Spring! It is not only time for my trees to wake up, it is time for **me** to wake up as well. I feel as though I have been hibernating for a very long time.

So, what shall we be thinking of or actually doing regarding our bonsai during March? Take each tree, set it before you, and closely examine it. Clean it up as needed. Remove dead leaves, weeds, etc. Does this tree need repotting this spring? Make sure you are prepared to do that if needed. Do you have the pots, soil, supplies required to do that properly? Note the tree's health. Does it have any issues – diseases or insect problems that need addressing? Does it seem to have grown adequately the past year or do you need to improve sun, fertilizer, etc. over the upcoming year. Make a note of any styling issues you wish to address this year. New front? Changing limb angles. More complete wiring?

This time of year the water requirements of trees will be changing. Stick that finger in the soil often this month to determine soil moisture. Water accordingly.

Depending on how your trees are stored over winter, your trees will wake up at various times. If your trees are kept in a garage, for example, they will begin warming up, perhaps too much too soon. If your trees push buds too early and they do not have enough light, you will get long internodes and large leaves, neither of which you want. You can slow down your trees by cracking a window or leaving the door open even a small amount. Also, if you have early growth, you will have to watch for below freezing temps. You may need a heater in your garage to prevent damaging cold nights once your trees have leaves.

Pines can benefit from sunshine early in the year. Bring them back in to protect them from freezing nights. If you are home, as many retired folks are, you can stage your trees in the front of your garage bay and leave the door open during the day to allow your trees to get sun.

March is a great time for bonsai. Enjoy the rebirth of your trees!

SPRING REPOTTING IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Ivan Hanthorn

Now that repotting season is really here, be conscious of the sequencing of actions and objectives to accomplish desired outcomes without too much self-inflicted pain. In particular, avoid having to undo something or wait a year to do something because a process step was out of order. Focus on the step in process but keep the big picture in mind. So, when picking the pot appropriate for the tree into which you intend to pot the tree this season, also consider when the bonsai will next be exhibited and what kind of exhibition stand would be appropriate for both the tree and the pot. The tree and the pot together are the bonsai (a two-part art object); the stand is the equivalent of the frame for the artwork. The following piece is the briefest of précis on the topic, but good to bear in mind. This comes from the March 2015 issue of the Lake Charles Bonsai Society *Bonsai News*.

BONSAI DISPLAY STANDS

by Walter Pall

Do what pleases your eye! Correct, but what does please the eye in general.

- 1) The style of the stand must correspond with the style of the tree. A strong tree must have a strong looking stand. A formal upright tree looks best on a stand with rather straight legs. An informal upright is put on a stand with curved legs. An optically heavy bonsai is placed on an optically heavy stand. A classically styled tree must stand on a classical table. A freestyle tree should stand on a modern table.

- 2) The color of the stand should correspond with the color of the pot and the appearance of the tree. A conifer is put on a rather dark stand. A light brown stand can be used for a deciduous tree.
- 3) Special situations: a cascade is put on a very high stand. A semi-cascade on a medium high stand. A literati tree looks often best on a very low stand that is round or irregular. Wooden slabs can be used. Bonsai which appear wild and do not readily conform to rules are put on wild stands, like raw wood slabs from a fence or an old building. While frowned upon in Japan one can place trees on stone slabs.
- 4) Placement of bonsai on the stand and size of stand: The stand should be one third longer than the pot. The pot is not put exactly in the center. E.g. if the tree is more on the right side of the pot, the pot is placed more on the left side of the stand. If the tree has a long branch slanting far out of the pot it is placed more on the opposite side of the slanting branch. The whole thing must be a composition just like placing a tree in a pot.
- 5) The style of the stand should be as subdued as possible. Just like with pots usually less is more. Wild natural wood stands with lots of carving are a matter of taste which is not mine.
- 6) Shohin are placed on combined stands. Their placement is a bit freer as is choice of pot.
- 7) Accent plants should also have their own table. It is usually best if it is very low, just a slab of wood or some bamboo sticks together, also a rice mat. Sometimes one can place the tree and the accent plant on the same table, if it is very flat, like a slab.
- 8) In a large exhibition it is not necessary for all trees to be on stands. There can definitely be too many stands in a room. Often stands are very useful to raise a tree to the eye level. Especially very small trees can be overlooked, if they are not placed on rather high stands. Very large trees can be placed on stands that are placed directly on the floor.

At exhibits, when there are high tables offered, it is sometimes better to place a tree on a slab, so that it does not stand too high.

These are just a few thoughts. As with choice of pots it is a skill that has to be developed over years. It takes five years to learn about styling trees. Another five years to choose the right pot. Another five to place them together with a stand and an accent plant.

Bonsai Ancestry as evidenced in Japanese Woodblock Prints

Ivan Hanthorn

Japanese woodblock prints, or Ukiyo-e, were certainly not the only but still the principal tools of the Japanese invasion of European aesthetics in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Their depiction of Japanese material culture introduced the West to a myriad of new and different art objects and forms, including bonsai. The following triptych print suite is a classic in this regard.

Tea Ceremony Triptych with a Bonsai



This masterpiece is the work of Watanabe Nobukazu (Japanese, c. 1872–1944). He is perhaps best known for his charming triptychs, such as this one, of beautiful women in their daily lives.

This lovely view is set in the home of an upper-class family. In the right panel, a young woman in a bright blue kimono tied with a fabulous green checkered obi performs the famous tea ceremony. Her guests sit quietly while she kneels beside the container of water on a brazier, carefully stirring the tea in a bowl with a spoon. A niche on the wall behind her [tokonoma] holds a hanging scroll of a setting sun and pine branch. Below it is a floral arrangement [ikebana] in a basket on a red lacquer stand. Toward the back of the room on the left side there is a low lying table with a marvelous blue pot and bonsai tree in full bloom. In the left foreground, another young woman has just finished painting a design on a folding fan and holds it out for her companion to examine. She sits beside a low table covered with sheets of paper, an ink stone and containers with her brushes, pigment and water. Behind her a young girl holds a stack of books while the child to her right smiles happily as she fans herself. All the fabrics and household furnishings are elegant and detailed in their rich design.

The scene is a sentimental look backward in time, to the cultured life of the upper classes before everything Japanese was challenged by Western technology, thought, and military might. Note that in this dreamy cultured setting anchor points include bonsai, ikebana, and tokonoma. The bonsai would be in a different style pot today but otherwise it looks quite normal and attractive to a contemporary audience. Note that everything shown in this woodblock set is today highly collectable and usually very expensive, even the bonsai.

(cont. on page 9)

TRADITIONAL EVERYTHING

Ivan Hanthorn

Tradition trumps all rules. Not only in bonsai, where this rule certainly obtains, but in all traditional societies. The image below is from an early 20th century postcard. Probably from the early 1920s. This is an ume, one of the tradition laden plant forms of Japan. The caption at the bottom of the card identifies it as plum bonsai and clarifies that the sign in the pot bears the name of the bonsai: "Kyoryu" (Mad Dragon). It is probably a yamadori, an estate yamadori at least if not a mountain yamadori. Bonsai cultivation came late to this wonderful trunk; the ume had grown old and wizen all on its own. In its age, this tenacious tree deserves the respect now given to it, planted in a richly glazed sumptuous pot imported from China. Because it is what it is—ancient, ume, traditional shape, bearer of a poetic name, possessing a magnificent kama, and so much more—modern observations about an inadequate nebari, reverse taper, questionable pot selection, etcetera do not apply.



Compare the bonsai above with the bonsai in the woodblock triptych discussed elsewhere in this newsletter. Notice any similarities? Bear in mind that both images were created within a relatively close time frame.



They are essentially the same, meaning therefore that they are individual expressions of a community shared deeply imbedded image of deep symbolic importance regarding the ineffable. (I may have been reading a little too much of Joseph Campbell of late.) Both trunks have the same lines, just differing lengths of legs in the axial progression. The only real difference is a short leg toward the top of the axis of each, which determines where the cascade of bloom will be—external as in the printed form, or internal from the flower shower head at the end of the trunk in the photographed form.

Prints and photographs of earlier Japanese bonsai still can teach us much about the art form, and provide tools and perspectives for better reading of contemporary bonsai.

“Half the lies, they tell about me, aren’t true.”

“I never said most of the things I said.”

“Nobody goes there anymore. It’s too crowded.”

Yogi Berra

Bonsai Smart: 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 roots, damaging root hairs during root pruning, etc. can be fatal.

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 overflow the edges of the pot.

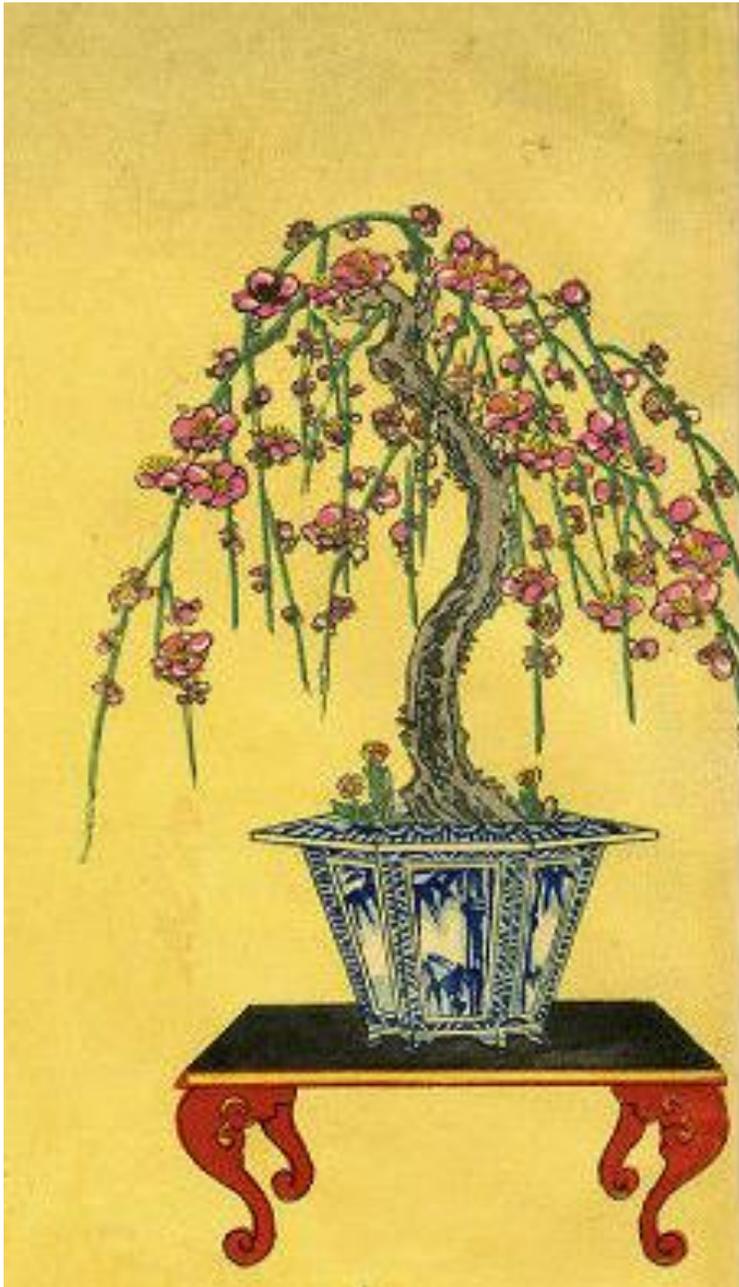
Because repotting is done on a bonsai only once every few years, it should be taken as an opportunity to carefully examine the tree's root system. While the bonsai tree roots are exposed and spread out, look for roots that are spongy or of an unhealthy color. An unhealthy color is one that is dark brown 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 your 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.

As you go through your bonsai season this year, think about the roots each time you interact with your tree. As you water or fertilize or prune your tree, think about the roots and how they are being impacted by what you are doing and by the environment that day. How does hot weather affect the roots? Wind? Several days of rain? Just because the roots are out of sight, do not let them be out of mind!

(cont. from p. 4)



The bonsai tree is a crabapple. The little flowering plants in the pot were a common convention of the time. Note the obvious pruning and shaping techniques and the use of pot and table to emphasize the feminine nature of the bonsai tree. The woodblock artist has taken artistic license in presenting this bonsai within a greater artistic composition, but take it as it is. Do you think it would show well today in a bonsai show?