

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

www.easterniowabonsai.ning.com

IBA MAY Activities

Saturday, May 16, Mark Fields demonstration and workshop

Magruder Farm, near Indianola, Iowa

Restricted to 10 participants with room for silent observers. At time of going to press there were 2 openings, and more room for silent observers. If interested contact the IBA President Michael Harmon. Mark Fields has a website: www.bonsaibyfields.com

Tuesday, May 19, 7:00pm, IBA Meeting
Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden, 909 Robert D. Ray Drive, Botany Lab

Program: Forest Planting on a Slab. Chat and chop—bring your project tree or any tree you want to work on.

EIBA MAY Activities

May 7, 2015 6 pm EIBA Board Mtg at Nothing But Noodles Restaurant.

May 21, 2015 7 pm Club Meeting at Pierson's Flower Shop on Ellis Blvd. **CANCELLED!!**

June 27, 2015 Noon Club Picnic at Guthridge Park in Hiawatha at Green Pavillion.

Foster Tree Auction. Dave Lowman and DaSu Bonsai vending. Pot Luck Picnic. Bring side dish to share and your own plates/silverware. Club to supply meat and drinks.

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Japanese maples are usually a feminine style tree with thinner trunks than a Trident maple. Not this behemoth belonging to Walter Pall of Germany who imported it as rough bonsai stock from Japan. It is a rough bark Arakawa Japanese maple. This tree is 80 years old and just now becoming a bonsai!



Timely Tips

This time of year, your trees should really be growing with all the sun, moisture, warmer temps and a bit of fertilizer. Deciduous growth is prolific with beautiful shades of green and perfectly shaped leaves still in pristine condition. Juniper tips are extending and foliage is filling out. Pine candles are pushing now, too.

With rain, wind, and wildly fluctuating temperatures this time of year, one of the real challenges to healthy bonsai is watering. As we have all heard, watering is the hardest thing to learn. Besides rain, winds, changing temps, we also have the variables of deeper vs shallow pots, our tree species in our collections might have varying natural water needs – a maple requires more water than a white pine, the porosity of the soil in each pot also is a major watering variable, recently potted soil will drain faster than soil that is two years old. How do we balance all these factors in deciding how much to water? Well, it's not easily done. That is why experts suggest using highly draining soil so you cannot over water and to keep most or all of your trees in the same or similar soils. Having too many soil types confuses you when determining how to water.

But, basically, you have to pay attention. Be in the moment. Be one with your tree! I know, it sounds a bit Zen. If you have more than one tree think about how each tree has been doing recently. Has it been taking up water normally? Is it healthy? How fast has it been growing? Then consider the weather yesterday and today. Has it rained? A bit or a lot? How windy is it today? How sunny and how warm is it today? Asking yourself these questions should help you figure out, do you need to water today at all, water lightly, or heavily? And each tree may have its own answer. Do not automatically pour the same amount of water on each tree. Stick your finger into the soil to see how wet or dry it is each time you get ready to water. Use a wooden skewer and place it in the soil for a few minutes to help you assess moisture level of the soil. And when you water, water thoroughly until water runs out the drain holes. Also, water each tree twice, using two different watering angles. Watering is a challenging juggle. Get it right and your trees will love you!

How To Improve Your Bonsai Collection

John Denny

Everyone with bonsai trees imagines themselves with a beautiful collection of trees. Usually, a lot of trees. Trees of many species and many styles. All healthy, all beautiful. But there are limitations which we all live with. How much money, how much time, how much knowledge, how much space, how much ability do I have? It is worth knowing your limits mentioned above because they will affect, ultimately, how good your collection can be. To improve your collection you will have to improve your knowledge and ability, improve both summer and winter storage space, spend more time, spend more money. You do not need to do all of these things, but improve some of them. Once you are ready to improve your collection, here are a few thoughts on **how** to improve your bonsai collection.

First, if you already have a lot of trees, get rid of some. If you eliminate a third of your lesser quality trees, the average quality of your collection goes up. Plus, you can spend more time paying attention to and working on your best trees, which will continue to improve. Most people new to the hobby get excited and buy lots of cheap or low quality trees. This is natural. New hobbyists want to learn and having a variety of trees to work with allows for more rapid learning. But once you have ramped up your learning curve and can keep trees alive and healthy, it is time to work with higher quality trees. Give away or sell your lesser trees, trees with flaws, those with less of a future, any unwanted species, etc. Less is more!

Next, how do we build our collection back up with better trees?

- 1) Nursery stock is what most folks begin with. Instead of smaller, cheaper trees, begin looking for trees with bigger trunk caliper. This is the main characteristic that makes a tree look like a better tree and it is worth paying a bit more to acquire trees with bigger trunks. Look for nebari and the way the tree flares out as it enters the soil.
- 2) Dig your own. If you want more unique natural looking trees, dig your own. Find a good location, ask permission, and collect a tree. You will have to take care to help the tree survive the first year as it transitions from its old location to your bench. And it will take time to become a decent tree. But unique trees help fill out a collection and they add character as well.
- 3) Buy trees from an experienced hobbyist who is upgrading their own collection. They may be shedding better trees than you have. You can often get a good deal and you can be sure to know the history of that tree. The seller often will be from your own club and can help you with tips on how to care for and improve the tree. Often you can get a decent pot along with the tree – a bonus.
- 4) Prebonsai can be purchased from specific bonsai vendors who offer trees specially grown for eventual creation of finished bonsai. Places like Brussels Bonsai come to mind. You can find young bonsai trees already in bonsai pots, but really not yet true bonsai. You will have to develop them. These places also offer larger, older prebonsai still in nursery containers which you can purchase and work with. These often have good trunk girth and movement. Look for healthy trees with good nebari and basic branch placement. This will allow you to have a good tree with excellent potential.
- 5) Workshop material is the next step up from prebonsai. A workshop that supplies a tree is fun. You get a decent tree at a fair price, plus you get an expert to help you style the tree, teach you techniques, maybe even do the harder work on your tree, and teach you how to care for and style the tree into the future. A great way to go. Bring a friend and you will you will have even more fun!
- 6) True yamadori, or collected trees, is often the next level to improve your collection. If you want to add very old trees (100+ years of age), you likely will have to collect or buy from collectors, conifers grown in high elevation areas out west. Look for Ponderosa pines, limber pines, Rocky Mountain junipers, etc. Andy Smith of Golden Arrow Bonsai offers excellent trees at very good prices. If you want some really good yamadori and have the money, look into Randy Knight or Ryan Neill, both of Oregon. Look for aged deadwood. The more the better. Look for great trunk movement, especially on junipers. And make sure the foliage is healthy. Ask how long the tree has been in a growing container and how the roots looked when collected and potted. Yamadori can be wild, rugged, aged looking trees and can really make your collection pop. Do your research and buyer beware of weak trees that might not make it in the long run.
- 7) Finished bonsai trees are an immediate way to improve your collection. No waiting. Spend the money and you can find beautiful bonsai already in nice pots where all the growing and developing steps have been done for you. Now you simply have to keep up with good finished bonsai techniques and your tree will continue to shine. You can often show these trees almost immediately, if you like placing your trees into shows.

Another key way to improve our collection is to improve each of our trees season over season, year over year. Now, how do we do a better job of improving our trees year over year? 1) Improve your knowledge. 2) Improve your skill. 3) Have someone more expert help you.

Improve your **knowledge** though attending club meetings, reading books, watching videos (Bonsai Boon videos are excellent), finding good sources of information on the internet (Bonsai tonight, Peter Tea, Michael Hagedorn, Bjorn Bjorholm blogs are great), attend workshops and learn from the teacher, join a study group with a good teacher that meets 3 or 4 times a year is a great way to gain knowledge. Newcomers to bonsai often see their trees suffer setbacks from winter damage, pests, diseases, etc. Gain the knowledge you need regarding pesticides, miticides, fungicides. Learn how to more safely store your trees over winter. The more you improve your knowledge, the fewer setbacks your trees will suffer. Another way to improve your knowledge is to attend bonsai shows. The higher the quality of the show the more you will learn. Visit the Chicago show or a national show if you can. Or you can buy "picture books" of the shows where each tree is nicely photographed in its display while at a show. You can learn so much from these books. Study various species, styles, accent plants, pot selections, display furniture, etc. Kokufu books are especially wonderful.

Improve your bonsai **skills**. First buy good tools which make it easier to improve your skills. Learn to use those tools properly to master techniques of pruning, deadwood creation, bending branches, etc. Watch how masters use these tools. Workshops are great for this as you can see up close how a teacher handles a technique, say, creating a jin. He cuts the branch first. Does he use a saw, a concave cutter, or pruning shears? How does he hold each tool? What is the exact placement and motion to make the tools work best? What order does he do things? What tool does he use to strip the bark? He likely has many tips like using pliers to crush the end of the cut branch to loosen the bark. He likely will use scissors or concave cutters or possibly a knife to cut a ring just through the bark around the base of the jin branch where it attaches to the trunk, so when you pull off the bark it will not peel down the trunk. Next there are several ways to remove the wood so you do not have a round pencil like branch with a squared off end. The master can teach you details of how to do it. Then he will let you try. As you attempt to jin your first branch, he will show you several ways to improve your technique. Learning techniques from a master is way faster than reading about it or even watching someone, and then trying it yourself in a trial and error manner. A key technique that is critical to learn is wiring. You have to learn this hands on. You will feel awkward and clumsy at first. But a master can quickly improve your hand and finger placement so you can manage the wire better. He can show you how to support the branch safely and show you how to use pliers to help apply and bend bigger gauge wire. Again, trial and error with a teacher is the way to learn. He can show you how to anchor wire, how to use guy wires, how to avoid crossing wires, how to prep a branch to make it easier to wire, how to get the correct tension, spacing, and pitch of the wire on the branch.

Another critical technique to learn is repotting. Understanding soils, learning how to clean old soil effectively and safely, root pruning, tying in your tree, adding and working in soil, finishing the surface are all important techniques to learn. Watching an expert do it will help you learn a critical skill.

I have mentioned having an **expert** show you how to master bonsai techniques. How do you find and afford expert help? You can attend workshops taught by masters for around \$50 (bring your own tree). You only get a few minutes of the experts time in a workshop, but you can learn a lot. Better yet is to join a study group which is a small group of hobbyists who hire an expert to help them learn and work on their own trees. This group meets 3 or 4 times per year to learn what work needs doing on your trees as they move through each season. This is a great way to go and typically costs \$60–100 per day. You get a lot more time with the expert and he helps you improve your trees. There are more and more “Seasonals” taught by top masters, where you go to the master where he lives and work on his trees. This is significantly more expensive, but a great experience. I was able to work on superb trees, including one that was featured in a top bonsai magazine.

Learning all the many techniques associated with good bonsai is half the battle when trying to improve your trees year after year.

Some other ways to improve your collection that you may not have considered.

- 1) Buy better pots! A good pot makes your tree pop. The old Japanese rule was to spend the same amount on a pot as you did on your tree. A thousand dollar tree should have a thousand dollar pot! Well, I won't adamantly stand by this guideline, but you get the idea. Improve your pots and those viewing your collection will swear the trees have improved!
- 2) Grow and keep accent plants to go with your trees. Accents can be fun in and of themselves. My dear wife loves bonsai accent plants, which is why mine keep disappearing! Accent plants make your trees look better. Plus, you are better prepared to enter shows.
- 3) Improve your outdoor display area so your trees can look good. Rather than throwing a nice tree on a rusty old table only 18 inches off the ground (so you only look down onto the top of the bonsai), place it on a nice wooden bench at 36–40 inches height. Your tree will look much better. Build two or three of the single post stands and show your best two or three trees of the season. This will make your collection improve and they create an immediate impression on anyone coming to see your bonsai.

Okay, that was a long article with many ideas on improving your collection. Overwhelmed? Don't think you have the cash to improve your collection? Here is my plan B. Everyone has a rich uncle. Buddy up to him for a couple of months. Mow his lawn. Buy him his favorite bottle of scotch. Tell him how great he looks in his new toupee. Then take him on a long jog – uphill. Caveat: you must be in better shape than your rich uncle! Otherwise he will inherit **your** bonsai collection instead of you inheriting his money! No rich uncle? Then tell your kids that college is too expensive and they can make more money as a plumber anyway. Then sneak some of that 529 college money you squirreled away for them and take a road trip in search of great trees!

Alright, back to reality now. Money makes it easier to improve your collection. However, most of us have emptier pockets than we'd like. Review the list above as there are several cheap ways to improve one's collection. For me, the time factor has helped. Each year I have purchased a couple new tools and now I have plenty. Each year I added a couple good pots, attended a couple of workshops with good trees provided, I acquired trees from better collections, I learned ways to improve the trees I had each year. After ten years, viola! Improvement at a reasonable price. Age has its advantages.

Take the long view with your collection. Think big picture. Slow and steady improvement, year over year, and you will get there. Look over the quality of your bonsai collection today. Make plans to improve it over the next year. A year from now I hope to hear several of you tell me how much your collection improved and then tell me just how you did it! Best of luck and have fun on the way!

Penjing Club Project?

Below is a beautiful penjing you may have seen before. It seems to me a club could create something like this, only on a smaller scale, as a group project. Junipers are relatively cheap. Some flat stones from a landscape company could be found and glued together with spaces left here and there for soil pockets. Put everything on a base and you might have something very nice, though on a smaller scale. Anyone daring enough to give it a try?



HISTORICAL BONSAI PHOTOGRAPH

Ivan Hanthorn



This photograph of a very large needled bonsai is from the 1920s. The screen behind the bonsai is just a bit less than 6 feet in height. Therefore the total composition of bonsai, pot, and appropriately sized table is approximately 5 feet. The needled bonsai is probably a red pine, or possible a green pine. Note the trunk, which is much smaller in diameter than current tastes in show bonsai.

The caption indicates that this installation is in the Hotel Daitokan of Sladzuoka. The modern spelling of the prefecture is Shizuoka, a very popular and historical area of Japan, where the Hotel Daitokan is still present. It provides natural hot spring baths as part of the services in booking a traditional Japanese style room. These are tatami rooms, with everything very low. Following are photos of typical rooms now. One may still stay in a room with a delightful tokonoma, and perhaps a very lovely fresh ikebana, but probably no more giant bonsai. One room package now available appears very traditional except for the internet connection, with access to natural hot springs, open air baths, and public baths (very Japanese), for a mere \$118. Note the tokonoma in the photos, with ikebana rather than bonsai.



And One More Watering Tip

Michael Hagedorn

Sometimes, when watering our bonsai gardens, we might notice a tree that is always dry. It seems like minutes after we water it, the darn thing needs water again. This should set off jangling alarm bells in our heads! Loud, nasty, persistent ones.

When a bonsai dries out this fast, there is often a very simple reason. The interior of the soil mass is not getting saturated. Very old established bonsai sometimes have this problem. It can happen with nearly any soil type, but is very common with Turface, Oil-Dri, and any soil containing peat moss. All of these have rehydration problems when dry.

Clearly the result of mismanaged watering

A combination of issues can cause the interior area to become bone dry:

- soil choice
- erratic watering schedule
- compacted interior soil
- 'vener watering' (watering with only a light pass that does not completely saturate)

Of the issues, an erratic watering schedule and veneer watering are the worst. *Inconsistent watering can cause some pots to get too dry, and then light watering simply runs down the sides of the pots and into the bottom after encountering very dry interior soil.*

Once the interior becomes bone dry it can be hard to rehydrate. The best way to restart hydration is to soak it from the bottom up. In my yard, I might see a couple trees a year that need a soak. After the soak, usually with more attention to watering afterwards, the problem is fixed.

- The reason this is such a serious issue is that eventually all the interior roots will die, leaving only those next to the sides of the pot and the bottom---which are really the worst places for a bonsai to grow roots.

To rephrase and sum up, when you see a tree that seems always to be dry, consider rehydration with a bottom soak. Usually this only happens with very established, old bonsai that have a mature root system. Most trees that have hydration problems need an extra pass or three with the water hose to keep from revisiting the 'dry death zone', which would be a pretty good title for a bonsai horror movie, come to think of it. Likely somewhat limited audience.

How to Make a Wire Caddy

John Denny

If you get a little frustrated with the messiness of all your coils of bonsai wire, perhaps a wire caddy is for you. You can purchase one at a premium price or if you like do it yourself projects here is information on how to build one yourself. This info comes from a club in Florida. If you build one, let me know how it turned out. Send us a photo and we can share your accomplishment.

Also, there are other ways to build a wire caddy. Some are vertical, while others are horizontal. Let us know if you have directions for other styles you would like to share.

List of Materials

- ¼" diameter threaded rod approximately 20" long or as long as you require
- Eight (8) ½" plywood disks 7" diameter. The first or bottom disk can be larger – your choice.
- PVC spacers 2 3/8" diameter cut into lengths of approximately 2 1/2". If your wire is thicker than cut to longer lengths but make sure your treaded rod is also longer.
- One (1) 6" diameter lazy Susan from a home improvement center like Lowes or Home Depot.
- Two (2) threaded T nuts.
- Handle can be fabricated from wood or you can buy one from the hardware department of the home improvement center.

Fabrication and Assembly

- Fabricate the ½" plywood disks with a routed channel in which to fit the PVC spacers.
- Cut your PVC into desired lengths and glue them into the channels of the spacers.
- Screw on the nail clip to one end of the threaded rod and hammer into the first plywood disk. This is the base of the caddy.
- Screw on the Lazy Susan to the bottom of the base disk.
- Slide on the Plywood disks with PVC spacers onto the rod.
- Screw on the top disk with your handle.

Total cost for material is approximately \$30 depending upon your selection of the wood disks and Lazy Susan. Our plywood disks are "cabinet grade" plywood with a pre-finished surface.

Kokufu ten Winning Trees

John Denny



Chinese quince, *Pseudocydonia sinensis*



Japanese grey-bark elm (Zelkova serrata)