



# the **TREE LINE**

the official monthly  
publication of the

**BONSAI SOCIETY of PORTLAND**

## Upcoming Events

May  
2021

### Virtual BSOP Meeting:

May 25, 7pm - 9pm, Michael Hagedorn on his book, **Bonsai Heresy**

June 22 7-9pm, Young Choe speaks on Kusamono

### National Meeting:

September 11-12, 2021, US National Bonsai Exhibition. Rochester, NY 14445

## President's Report

Greetings BSOP,

Hope everyone is enjoying this wonderful dry spring. Here in my garden at RAKUYO we've been busy keeping up with weeds and fertilizing, as all plants are busy growing this time of year. Because of that, keep a close eye on a few things in your garden in order to have a successful spring.

1. **Watering** - we tend to think that Summer is the most dangerous time for bonsai watering, but in fact Spring is where the most danger lies. Right now, everything is growing. When plants are elongating is when they will dry out the quickest! Whenever you see shoot extensions growing, keep an eye for watering as this is the most critical time to get things hydrated properly.
2. **Fertilizing** - we've had an unusually dry spring here in the Willamette Valley. Because we're lacking precipitation, consider using liquid fertilizers instead of solid fertilizers. Fish emulsion is a great organic liquid fertilizer (plant's will hardly react to the difference between emulsion or hydrolysate, so go for the cheapest option), and Dyna Gro Grow or Fox Farm's Grow Big are fantastic low-number chemical fertilizers. You can even consider doing a cocktail of an organic and chemical fertilizer to give things an extra boost. Generally speaking, if you're trying to grow a bigger trunk or primary branching, fertilize frequently (once or twice a week) during elongation in the spring and through the entire growing season. If you're trying to maintain a bonsai and create fine twigging, maybe only fertilize once or twice in the Spring and then up the frequency after spring growth hardens off. Things to be defoliated or decandled should be getting lots of fertilizer, as well as weak plants.
3. **Weeds** - now is the time to stay on top of weeds popping up in your bonsai. If you can regularly pull them, then you can get on top of them before they start spreading by seed. Be diligent and religious about weeding, and with constant devotion you can eradicate them from your bonsai pots.

4. **Start planning late spring work** - we are a couple weeks away from the start of decandling and defoliating season. The consensus of several local bonsai professionals is to decandle large multi-flush pines in Mid-May, medium multi-flush pines in late May, and shohin multi-flush pines by the end of the first week of June. Decandling past June 7th in our climate can weaken multi-flush pines by not giving them enough time to regrow. Examples of multi-flush pines include Japanese Black Pine, Japanese Red Pine, and Loblolly Pine among a few others.

For multi-flush deciduous, we have less of a strict calendar to work, but can begin anytime after the leaves harden off and the base of the new shoot gets woody. To fully defoliate a deciduous bonsai, make sure there are strong extensions all over the plant, and ramp it up with some fertilizer a couple months before the operation. Examples of multi-flush deciduous include trident maples, amur maples, styrax and wisteria, among several others. After decandling or defoliating, be sure to monitor watering closely, as these plants will not need nearly as much watering as they did before work.

5. **Pests** - this is also the time of year that pests start showing up in our gardens. I just spotted some aphids here at RAKUYO today as I write this. Keep a close eye on your plants as they are growing, and tender new growth is where pests like aphids like to congregate and steal resources from your plants. Try to be responsible with pest controls, especially if you live near honeybees. Oils like neem can be a great alternative to protecting bees and killing aphids, as the oils smother them, just be sure that oils are applied on cool cloudy days, rather than hot sunny ones.

Hope you have a great spring! Our board is currently planning our first in-person event for this summer, so be on the lookout for more information on that in the near future. Until then, enjoy this time with your bonsai. It's an exciting and busy time of year for plants!

Cheers,

*Andrew Robson*, President, Bonsai Society of Portland

## **BSOP MEMBER BENEFITS**

**From the BSOP Policy and Guidelines; Personal one-time ads for such things as home sales may be presented to the Membership Chair for distribution via email on a space/time available basis. Please allow a minimum of 14 days notice.**

Contact Patrice Morrow/ Membership Chair, at [tm4170399@aol.com](mailto:tm4170399@aol.com) with your message that is prepared and ready to be sent, along with your desired date of distribution. This will be sent to all members of BSOP, except for those that have opted out of club emails.

Realistically, I often can process these in a more timely manner than the 2 weeks mentioned above, but please plan ahead as much as is feasible. Approval of content and timing are at the discretion of the Membership Chair. This is a service that is intended for bonsai related messaging.

Advertising in the monthly newsletter can also be arranged for members. Please contact me for details.

# From BSOP Membership;

Our one year dues moratorium is drawing to a close. I hope you have all had a chance to enjoy some of the wonderful online programming that we've been able to provide for our members during this past year. Many thanks to Reid Parham for booking and supporting such interesting educational programs. As we transition to regular paid renewals, please keep an eye out for renewal notices that will be sent out during your anniversary month. These will clearly state the procedure for renewing on the Bonsai Society of Portland's website. Looking forward to in person meetings in the not too distant future!

*Patrice Motlow* / Membership Chair

## Judging Bonsai Who Decides What is Good?

By Kath Hughes, UK

Photos courtesy Malcolm Hughes except photos on this page and facing page, top right, which are by Willy Evenepoel.

Part One. Look for Part Two and Part Three in an upcoming issue.

### Judged First-Class Trees at Various Shows.

All were judged by professional judges and placed first or second in major international shows. Are these *good* trees in your eyes? If so ask yourself why? Do not be too easily satisfied; be analytical in your evaluation. Good? Yes, we know they are, but why? What criteria do they fulfill? Do not give up, write down your comments and by the end of this series of articles we hope you be able to look back and say "*Yes, I understand.*"



Judging bonsai is always controversial and a highly subjective subject. How do we actually do it? We all agree that some bonsai are better, or much better, than others. In this three-part series, we will explore the various aspects of judging a bonsai, and try to design a judging system that can be used objectively to determine the quality of one bonsai, compared with another.

We will never, for as long as people remain different in their opinions on every factor from religion to what clothes they wear and what food they eat, succeed in devising a system that pleases all parties. However if we manage to satisfy the majority we will have made progress and hopefully silence those who still say, "*I gave it first prize because I liked it.*" At least they could say they like it based upon some measurable criteria that we all recognize. The challenge of such a system is not the problem of selecting the right criteria: We all know what to appreciate in a good bonsai. Design, harmony, visual balance within the tree, visual balance between pot and tree, good health, ramification and branch development, quality craftsmanship with

wiring and carving. We all know that a bonsai needs good taper to both trunk and major branches, proper branch development and refinement, good-looking nebari, and a pot that enhances the overall image.

### So what then, is the greatest challenge?

It is, to decide the relative importance of all these criteria, and form them into a system that is both simple and practical for all to use, and also containing enough depth to cover all the important aspects of what makes one bonsai better than the next one.

**Trunk taper** is very important—a major factor in creating the impression of age and the impression of grandeur in many species and styles.

**The root-base** (nebari), also species and style dependent, adds to the above qualities, and also provides the feeling of balance. It is important to remember that bigger is not necessarily better. A stronger taper or a larger nebari is not necessarily better than a smaller one. It has to be appropriate to the subject. When grading taper or nebari, we should not give a higher grade to a nebari just because it is larger. The key word is harmony: it has to be in harmony with the rest of the tree.

**Branch development** is a large category, and includes several aspects;

The proper placement of branches is one.

The development of a fine network of secondary and tertiary branches is another.

Finally, the branches need to be thick enough and tapered, in other words, in good proportion with the trunk, in order to appear as mature as the trunk itself.

All these branch-related aspects can be graded under the one category, branch development.

**Pot selection & placement.** Selecting a proper pot, and placing the tree correctly in it.

All this complicated as it may be, it is not nearly as difficult as creating an innovative design and recognizing character in a specimen.

### Recognizing patterns and shapes

We are born with the ability to recognize patterns and shapes. Our brains are exceptionally good at this type of task. We are amazing pattern recognition machines. Our brain has evolved to do exactly this with great accuracy, but does the brain have the ability to apply the same recognition pattern to differentiate between a good and a poor bonsai.

This we have to learn: exactly the same way we learn to appreciate bonsai. We learn that a tree that follows the bonsai rules is good. When it breaks one of these rules it is bad. We learn that trees designed by Kobayashi, Kimura, or any great master are good.

But we are not content with just being told. We learn to search images of trees for patterns. We learn to see ‘good’ application of rules and ‘bad’ application. We learn to see the similarities in trees which are ‘good’ and we somehow create our own internal rules of how to decide. We can then judge a tree which we have never seen before. We can tell right away whether we have a piece of raw material or a masterpiece in front of us. We are not all equally good at this. Some become very expert at it and become instinctive experts in judging bonsai.

Some bonsai have the ability to move us emotionally, to convey a message, to make us feel they are something special. Thus we say, “*That tree is good.*” But why, because we like it? Is that good judgement, can we be sure that this response isn’t simply a learned reaction? Appreciating a bonsai takes training. It is generally not the case that someone who has no training can appreciate and distinguish *good* from *bad* bonsai easily.

It is possible that what we call artistic training is essentially training for pattern classification? Since most of us were trained by looking at the same books and by similar examples of good and bad bonsai, our opinions will often be similar to other bonsai enthusiasts, and we will judge the new artist by the rules we have learned overtime.

In appreciating bonsai we must, of course, realize that there is more to it than just pattern recognition; we can never know to what extent our preferences are biased by the pattern-recognition training we have received in the past. Are we prepared to even listen to someone who comes from another bonsai culture? If we listen, do we understand what he or she is saying? Probably not, probably we want to stay in our comfortable well established and defined bonsai world rather than constantly having to question what we are thinking. We do not realize that what we think are *natural* rules just evolved accidentally and became a generally accepted code. How will we ever know the true difference between elitism perpetuated through pattern recognition and the intrinsic value of a bonsai?

### Truth, Beauty and the Eye of the Beholder

Bonsai competitions are a means of knowing where our trees stand in the league. How can they be improved and what can we work on harder to excel our skills? Bonsai exhibitions range from international events to local society shows. They provide a window on bonsai from the public perspective; however the knowledgeable enthusiast and the judges are likely to cast a more critical and maybe clinical eye on the trees.

Many people don't want their trees to be judged, their over sensitive egos could get hurt. Well, fine, keep on thinking your trees are great, that is your privilege. On the other hand, your tree, your pride and joy could be more than a little amateurish to the more knowledgeable eye. Fine, so you love your trees and in your eye they are great, but in your heart you know they do not compare with the best. So why be so misguided as to enter them in a competition? Just for the sake of exhibition? Well, if you say so, but do not think they are not being judged.

Judging comes in many forms. It may surprise you when I say that just about every bonsai exhibit is judged. How is that? In the end, the trees that are to be exhibited are selected from many—what is that but judging? How does this happen? Someone will have to tell someone else which trees to take to the show and which ones to leave at home and they will have to give reasons. The owners are often the poorest judges of their own trees—human nature is like that. It is accepted that a mother will always defend her child and she would always feel that he is better in every respect than how others may see him through more objective eyes. That is human nature and we forgive her. It is to be expected that in general bonsai folks think somewhat higher of their own trees than they really should, and that they believe that the bonsai of their nation is in generally better than they are, when looked at objectively. This is human nature and we forgive it. Some feelings may get hurt along the way, but it happens. Hurting of feelings is not often considered; in fact it is generally not even talked about but accepted as necessary collateral damage.

What I really ask is, why are otherwise reasonable, intelligent, cultivated and learned people often utterly unreasonable about judging their own tree? I suppose once again it is human nature to be unable to judge yourself with impartiality, but would you expect the gap between objectivity and personal perception to be so wide?

If this same person had not been so biased in his or her views, that tree would never have reached selection for a show, let alone be on the Show Bench. I have come to the conclusion that this phenomenon most frequently occurs when the people concerned have had very little or no exposure to quality bonsai. They have not seen major bonsai exhibitions and only judge bonsai from photos or the standard of their local club. Bonsai trees, regardless of quality, look best



## People's Choice

These were judged top trees by the general public at major shows; in some cases they were also award-winning trees. But why did the public make this judgment? I do not think you will have trouble answering this one. We have all seen it at our local shows. If it is in flower, has berries, or brightly colored leaves or even something strangely exotic/artistic, the public go for it. This is human nature not good judgement; it looks pretty like a beauty queen or an extraordinarily pretty actress who can't act but gets rave reviews.



in real life. It is very difficult to take a good picture of a bonsai because a photo is two dimensional and flat; the impact of three-dimensionality and depth perception is lost. How often have you seen photos of your trees and been disappointed; you really thought your tree was better than that! Often when people think they *know* certain trees from pictures and then see them in reality in an exhibit, they are amazed at how much more impact they have in reality.

Now they have certainly seen their own trees and those of their friends in reality and as we have established, it is human nature to see your own trees in a rosy light and rate them higher than perhaps they deserve. But a bonsai designer/creator needs to have a vision of the future of the tree he or she is creating. Sometimes that vision is so strong in the mind that the reality is not seen. The result is that often, trees are compared that should never be compared, and consequently, otherwise reasonable people come to strange judgments.

## Judges Are People Too!

These were all chosen by one or more judges to be the best tree, but did not reach that award because they were marked down by other judges. Why the disparity? More difficult to explain, but compare them to works of art. Which would be judged as best, a Picasso, a Constable or a Rembrandt? This is personal choice, not judgement. All may be equally good as works of art but not in the opinion of all judges. The same applies to bonsai: all the judges will know they are very good, well designed, healthy specimens, but they are not classic bonsai as they have been taught to expect to come out of Japan. In the same way a Picasso is not a classic scene as taken by the photographer and painted on canvas, so to many it is seen as not as good. It might however fetch even more when sold at auction. Some judges are extraordinarily passionate about something that is *different*.



## Recognizing Show Quality

Now these are from private collections. Why have they reached this stage of development but are not deemed to be in the show-class? Look more closely—wonderful trees—better than many of us will ever achieve, but are they prepared for showing? Are they weed-free? Are they fully trimmed and immaculate?

Are the jins and sharis perfectly clean and algae free? I know you cannot see this but do they have wires cutting in that should have been removed before exhibiting? I assure you they do. Do the layers of the branches reveal themselves clearly? All these are significant points to having a tree ready to put on a show table and hope to receive acclaim. And at this point I will not even mention how to display the tree; the correct pot, the accompanying accent or companion stone as well as the right stand on which to present the tree.



## Improving the quality of bonsai

If we are all so subjective and biased in our views and if we are going to go on with competitive bonsai shows who is going to judge our tree? The majority of enthusiasts want their trees to be judged and judged impartially. We need to encourage those who are hesitant to exhibit their trees. How are we to do this if so many see judging at present to be biased and unfair? The initial responsibility for motivating and guiding these individuals will most often rest within the bonsai clubs who are in regular contact with their members and have the greatest knowledge of the trees owned by their members. The major benefit of putting bonsai into a competitive exhibition is to encourage people to work on developing their trees to a higher standard and thereby enhance their collections. Thus we must produce some system that will give people confidence to exhibit competitively.

The answer would seem to me, to lie in producing criteria or guidelines for judging bonsai. I hesitate to say rules because rules are incredibly restrictive, rules are inflexible, thoughts cannot blossom, creativity cannot flourish. However judging without some form of rules equals chaos. Balancing rules against innovation is a pervasive problem in all of life. As ageism is pervasive and entrenched in our society so elitism is pervasive in bonsai culture. Bonsai must teach us balance, and as experience accumulates, the many exceptions and variations gradually invalidate the rules and by the same experience, the rules become less needed.

So our challenge is to try and produce guidelines that will be accepted and used by most. I would not dare to suggest all. If we can provide a universal set of criteria or guidelines and the means of using them at ground level, i.e., in local shows, and if it is seen to *work* and is treated with respect, then hopefully we can move on to getting the method accepted at national or international level.

*This article is extracted from the original on the BCI website. The original article contains more photos of trees to demonstrate the authors points.*



## Trees For Sale

Evergreens include native, Shimpaku and Itoigawa junipers, black and lodgepole pines, mountain hemlock and spruces, moderately priced, variety of sizes from hold in your hand to all one person wants to carry. Also varieties of maples, varieties of elms and accent plants. Plums, maples and elms are leafed out and pine candles are lengthening. Call 503 704 3891 to see the trees.

*Editor*

Mountain Hemlock



Japanese Satsuki  
Azalea Shukufuku'

### May Haiku

Satsuki best in May  
Flowers bloom both pink and white  
What more can you say.

*Ron Yasenchak*

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The Bonsai Society of Portland meets on the fourth Tuesday of each month.

**The Milwaukie Center**

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Enter parking lot from Rusk Road

Visitors are always welcome!

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Contact information is on the BSOP website [www.portlandbonsai.org](http://www.portlandbonsai.org) under

Services/Members Only/Membership Directory