



# Kongetsu

## West Michigan Bonsai Club Newsletter

Vol. 12 No. 7

August 2008

Mollie Hollar, Editor

### 2008 Schedule of Events

**Thur, Aug 14:** Bring Your Own Tree

**Sun, Aug 24:** Silent Auction

**Thur, Sept 18:** Show prep

**Sat & Sun, Oct 11 & 12:** Fall Show

**Thur, Oct 16:** 2009 Planning meeting

**Thur, Nov 20:** Winterizing

All events are held at Frederik Meijer Gardens unless otherwise noted.

### More Auction Info

Mary Lou says to bring your swim suits and a towel if you'd like to swim after all the other goings-on.

Our annual auction is definitely one of my favorite events. Besides sharing our unwanted bonsai materials with other Club members, it's a perfect opportunity for us all to get together in a social setting and really be able to get to know each other.

The other thing that is so valuable about our auction is that it raises funds for us to be able to have bonsai experts from out-of-state to share their knowledge. Case in point is Steve Pilacik from North Carolina, who was with us in March. For 2009 we will again be able to have someone from elsewhere to do a program for us

### 2008 – A Year for Me to Remember

I'm a very hands-on person. Whatever I take on, I intend to do a thorough job of it. Unfortunately this year with our Club, I haven't been able to follow through with many of my responsibilities, and I feel I must apologize to you, our members, for that. The reasons are many and varied, but they don't make up for my absences.

Again I am not able to attend a meeting this Thursday, our BYOT workshop. I will be setting up to sell bonsai and my needlework at the annual Danish Festival in Greenville and will just be starting when the workshop is beginning. I know you'll all do just fine without me, but I do want you to know that I feel guilty about my not being there.

### This Month

The BYOT workshop will be held in the Frey Room in the lower level at Meijer Gardens. Members will be working from 7:00 until 9:00 PM. You can bring as many trees as you want (within reason of course), and there will be a general sharing of information by the more experienced members to assist you in any questions or problems you might have with your trees. At this late time of the year, you won't be doing any work on the roots, but you can still do trimming and wiring of the foliage.

A word of warning: there are two huge events at the Gardens this Thursday evening, so you'll want to arrive early if you want a parking space in the general vicinity of the building.

Also this month is the silent auction at the home of our webmaster and her husband. I've included a map and directions to their house on the last page. If you're coming from a different direction from what's on the map, give Mary Lou a call at 616-897-9746 and she'll guide you.

Our silent auction works like this:

1. Gather up everything you don't use any longer for your bonsai and determine a good starting price for it. Bring it to Mary Lou and Joe's house at 10:00 AM on Sunday, August 24.
2. You will fill out an auction slip with the name of the item and the starting price, and we'll place the items on tables.
3. Between 10:30 and 11:00 we will open the bidding. You'll go around to each item, determine which you'd like to bid on, and write your name and your bid on the auction slip. Remember which ones you bid on because others will be bidding as well. You'll need to return to each item to check to be sure you're the highest bidder.
4. After about a half-hour we'll award each item to the highest bidder. Be sure to bring cash or checks to pay for your items.

After the auction we'll be having a potluck, so be sure to bring a dish to pass to feed about 20 people, and your table service (plate, cup and silverware). Mary Lou is providing pulled pork sandwiches.

### Article on Rules

Beginning on page 2 is a wonderful article by Jack Wikle on following rules in bonsai, with opinions with which I heartily agree.

## Shows Coming Up

It is getting late in the 2008 bonsai season, but there are still a few shows you should know about.

First, **this weekend** is the Mid-America Bonsai Exhibition at the Chicago Botanic Garden. There are demonstrations and workshops on Friday, Saturday and Sunday as well as one of the best exhibits in the Midwest. If you're free this weekend, I'd definitely recommend going. Get more information at [www.midwestbonsai.org](http://www.midwestbonsai.org).

I don't have notice of any shows in our immediate area in September, although I'll be making a trip to Oregon for a convention and to visit one of my pot suppliers and Joshua Roth Ltd., my tool supplier. I'm really excited about this trip.

If you'd like to take a trip to Rochester, New York, Bill Valavanis's International Bonsai Symposium is the weekend of **September 4-7**. The focus this year is on Deciduous Bonsai featuring Maples. As usual there is an excellent lineup of bonsai masters to learn from on this weekend. ***If anyone would be interested in going to this and sharing gas expense and a hotel room, let me know ASAP.*** I'm signed up to vend but, given gas prices and the distance, I may have to cancel.

**October 4 & 5** is the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society annual show at Matthaei Gardens near Ann Arbor. This is information from their club website:

"Annual showing of Society member's trees. Over 100

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## About Bonsai "Rules" and

## About Bonsai Styling as a Discovery Process

By Jack Wikle

The word "rules" used in connection with bonsai has always made me cringe. "Rules" are for contests like football, tennis or bridge – do it this way or be penalized. The term "guidelines" seems much more comfortable – guidelines being insights that have grown out of lots of experimentation over many years. Understanding that you don't have to do it that way, being aware of some of the commonly offered guidelines can be very helpful in decision making and in problem solving - especially when you are not happy with your tree and not sure why.

Like painting a picture or writing a story, there is no one way to style a bonsai. John Naka (the very famous Japanese-American bonsai artist and teacher) says it well, "Where one person will find a dragon, someone else will find a race horse . . . they are both nice. But, don't try to make a dragon and a race horse at the same time." Ultimately, any bonsai is its grower's personal statement, rather than some kind of test of his or her ability to follow a recipe.

To begin work on raw material with the idea of making it a certain style, or, even more confining, of creating a tree just like the one pictured on page 37 of your bonsai book, is not what usually happens. More often, the resulting bonsai is something partly or mostly unforeseen, something discovered in searching for ways to make the most of the material at hand. Stated in another way, bonsai styling is not so much about what you would like to have as it is about what you can do with what you have. As Bruce Baker puts it so succinctly, "Bonsai styles are descriptive, not proscriptive."

Typically, the initial styling process begins with exploration, with thoughtful study, with becoming "intimately" familiar with one's material. This means examining your plant from every possible perspective, twisting it, turning it, and tipping it left and right while pushing the foliage and branches aside to see what is really there – all the while, keeping in mind that this tree does not have to grow with its trunk at the same angle it has been growing. What can you find that you like? What do you find that you don't like? How can you accentuate what you find pleasing? How can you disguise or eliminate what is uncomfortable?

This is kind of a joke but it is serious too, my two sentence recipe for guaranteed styling success. "Cut off everything you don't like and you have to like what's left." "If you have nothing left, go get another plant and follow my recipe." Sounds simplistic? Sure it is, but this is very much what I do myself. Actually, it's not too different from the story I like to tell about the young couple visiting an artist who carved duck decoys. They were so impressed by his work that one of them blurted out, "I don't know how you do that!" The artist's reaction was, "Well, it's really very simple, I just take a block of wood and cut away everything that doesn't look like a duck." Sure, that is what we do with our bonsai isn't it? We take a woody plant (tree, shrub or vine) and cut away anything that doesn't look like an old or interesting tree. We are sculpting living material.

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beautiful trees from all sizes and species will be on display. Workshops, demonstrations and vendors, will be available. Visitors may vote in the People's Choice for their favorite bonsai selections from different categories.”

Check <http://annarborbonsai.society.org/calendar.htm> for more information. I'll be vending as will member Bob Goddard with his hand-made pots.

Our Club show is the second week of October and more information will be in the newsletter next month for that.

On that same weekend, Oct. 11 & 12, is the first National Bonsai Exhibition in Rochester, New York. Bill Valavanis is putting this together so it's guaranteed to be a fantastic weekend. For more information go to [www.internationalbonsai.com](http://www.internationalbonsai.com).

## July Meeting

The meeting on tropicals was another I had to miss due to health problems. I really hated to miss this one because the presenter is a member and treasurer of our new Mid-Michigan Bonsai Club and a Greenhouse Horticulturist Department of Plant Biology at MSU. Not only is she extremely knowledgeable about a huge variety of tropical plants, she's also familiar with a number of places to purchase said plants.

From all accounts, the meeting was a huge success. I hope the people who suggested this topic were able to attend. I understand there was a good-sized crowd and everyone apparently enjoyed it.

The effect of a lot of what we do in styling bonsai is simplification – “less is more.” In many ways this is much like editing a long article. Discarding a few pages will almost always make it better, more compelling. Scratching out two or three more paragraphs makes it better yet, easier to comprehend. Finally, going back and questioning the need for each word used, then eliminating those that aren't necessary, really sharpens the whole presentation.

Interestingly, when I am honestly in doubt about whether to eliminate part of a branch, or a branch, or even most of the top of a tree, if I make that cut, I almost always like the tree better. This is a pattern I recognized long before I began to understand what was happening. It was simplification. I was making a more basic, a more easily grasped statement. “When in doubt, cut it out.” That's my guideline.

Of course, in following these simple formulas, there is always the possibility of cutting off something you may want later. As one lady cautioned me, “My mother always told me, you can't cut it back on.” Or, from a man (smiling), “I don't want to find that I've cut it twice and it's still too short.” Well, you get the idea. But be encouraged remembering that trees grow and some of those things you remove can be re-grown -- eventually. However, be cautioned that the larger the cut, the longer it will take for that wood to be replaced. So be thoughtful! But, when you are honestly in doubt, cut! In cutting off what you don't want, be wary of leaving “equals” such as equal branch lengths, foliage masses of equal volumes or even equal-appearing spaces between branches. Having two or more tree parts, or even spaces, so similar in size and shape that one can't be distinguished from the other (like matched candle sticks, horns of an ox or mirror images), is almost never as “natural” appearing, as interesting, as is variation in size and form. When working with two units (two shoots at the end of a branch or whatever) a dominate/subordinate relationship is more comfortable and more interesting than visual equals (like the image of a sergeant and a corporal versus the image of two sergeants). If it's three units, remember the three bears in the Goldilocks story. The “orderly hierarchy” of big bear, little bear and middle-size bear is a much more interesting group than three bears so much alike you can't tell them apart.

Too much order, everything the same, over and over, is monotony. At the other extreme, too much disorder, no repetition of anything, is chaos. Our goal is a balance pleasing to us somewhere between monotony and chaos. Again, this is our choice, our personal statement. The balance that satisfies me may be quiet and comfortable. The balance that pleases you may be edgy and exciting. Something in between can be nice too.

Be aware that this idea of balance in bonsai applies not just to styling (“How short should I cut that branch? How much should I pull it down? How tall should my tree be?”). It applies to horticulture as well (“How much watering is too much? How much water is too little? How much fertilizer is too much? How much fertilizer is too little?”). As Doctor Heston likes to remind me the real issue here is “dosage.” And, John Naka again, “Of course you all know that too much is too much . . . and too little is too little . . . and just right is just right.”

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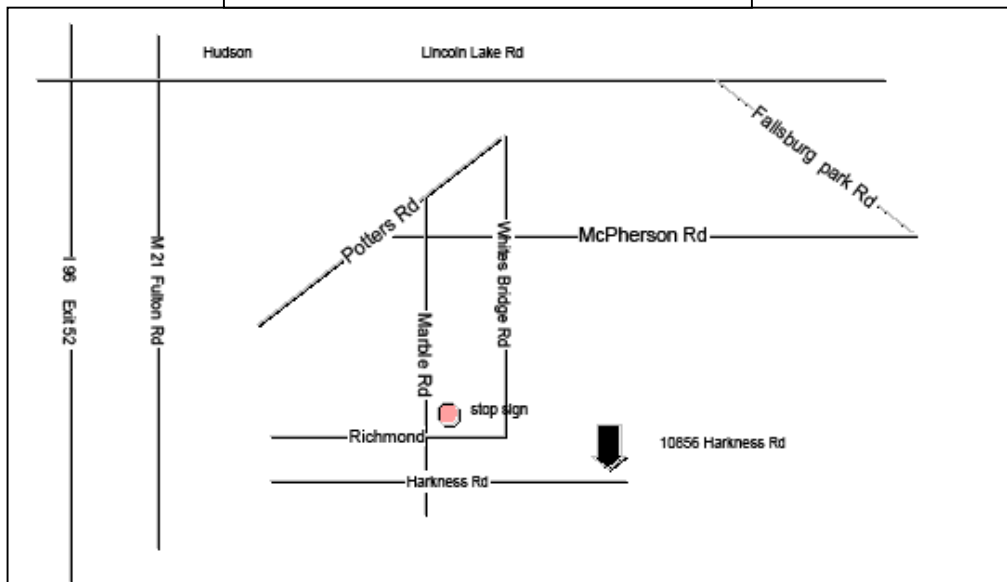
Yes! But how do we find that pleasing balance? How can we identify “just right”? The struggle seems never ending in almost the same way that a bonsai is never really finished. What seemed so right yesterday becomes uncomfortable, even annoying, today. As our tree grows our perceptions and our tastes change too. For me, I have found it very helpful, when I am having difficulty making a design or a horticulture decision, to ask myself, “Well, what would be unquestionably too much and then what is unquestionably too little?” Then I try what is about halfway between these extremes.

To summarize, learn from your material, being open to insight that just bubbles up unexpectedly, and don't let yourself be handcuffed by someone else's “rules” or guidelines. At the same time be alert for useful guidelines, the kind that make sense to you. Follow them when it's comfortable and violate them with a clear conscience when it's not, feeling free to explore your own tastes and sensitivity. After all, how are you going to sharpen your instincts if you don't follow them sometimes?

### Pots, Pots & More Pots

I recently purchased a collection of about 400 bonsai pots from a man in Ann Arbor, and will be working in the next few weeks to get them all on my website. Check in a month or so at [www.basicallybonsai.com](http://www.basicallybonsai.com) for a huge selection of pots, many straight from Japan!

### Directions to the auction



Take M21 (Fulton Rd) into Lowell. Turn left on Hudson. Hudson is in the center of town. There will be a gas station on 2 corners and the "Farmers Market" on another corner. Hudson will change its name to Lincoln Lake Rd. Take this road about 3 miles.. Watch for the little green signs on the right side of the road for Fallsburg Park. Turn right on Fallsburg Park. Just past the park entrance is McPherson Rd. Turn right on McPherson and take that 3.2 miles and turn left on Marble. Take Marble 2.5 miles and turn left on Harkness Rd. You will come to an old farm house. It will say road ends but keep going. Our house is the third one past the farm house

### 2007 Membership Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Phones: Home \_\_\_\_\_ Work: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

(Check one:)  
 Active membership (\$25.00)      Inactive membership (\$6.00)

(Check one:)  
 I prefer that my newsletter be e-mailed to me.  
 I prefer a snail-mail copy of my newsletter.

Please make check out to:  
**WMBC**  
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