

A Bright Future

By Andrew Smith

I've heard it said that a bonsai is "a tree that tells a story." Stories are things that have happened in some real or imagined place and time. Much of the training and styling we do with our bonsai trees is designed to enhance that feeling of strength and calm endurance that an ancient tree expresses. We want our bonsai to express a bit about all the countless seasons they have been through. We want them to have a past, to show the patina of time, so we can feel it.

A painting or a photograph can also tell a story about the past. And bonsai is often compared to them, as a visual art with semi-definable rules of proportion, rhythm (I can't spell it, much less get the hang of it), and composition. Some bonsai trees actually follow these rules, to great effect. Mine usually don't, and are in detention as a result, but they're slowly moving in the right direction.

The difference between a bonsai tree and a painting of a bonsai tree is that the actual bonsai tree has not just a past, but a future too. Once it's finished a painting does not keep developing in new ways with each passing season. It would be irritating if it did. What if you stopped at some truck stop in Kentucky and bought a print of that old masterpiece of the bulldogs playing poker and smoking cigars? Then what if you took it home and hung it in the den and a month later the bulldogs had turned into miniature poodles with pink ribbons and painted nails because of an unexpected cold snap? It would ruin the den and you'd have to go back to Kentucky and get another picture with bulldogs on it and just keep your fingers crossed about the weather.

But this is what we expect with our bonsai. They change, they grow, they develop season-by-season, and year-by-year. They tell a story but they're always in the middle of it. Half the story is yet to come. The future is unknown and often unexpected. There's some chaos called Life to deal with. The branch you thought you wanted may die, so it turns out that's not the one you wanted after all. Another branch you hadn't counted on may flourish and you discover that's the one you really wanted. The tree changes and grows. Given time and proper care the smallest and most unlikely sprout can mature into a breathtaking tree. As long as it's still green, the future is always bright.

I don't think I've learned yet to focus enough on the future of my trees. I style them and work on them in the hopes that they will look better when I am done. But the future I let come as it may. And sometimes I get poodles when I wanted pit bulls.

The culture of bonsai has a past and a future too. The stream begins somewhere in ancient China, then travels through Japan and finally to the rest of the world. The American Bonsai Society is nearing its 50th year of fostering a bonsai community in the U.S. Those of us who are involved in bonsai today owe a lot to the people who first planned and built an organization to promote the art we love.

Not too many years ago I heard many people in the bonsai community lamenting that interest in the art here in America seemed to be dying out. Club memberships were down everywhere and new faces at bonsai conventions were a rare sight. It was kind of a dismal feeling, being so devoted to an art that seemed to be becoming part of a lost age, with no relevant future in our geeky, instant, high-tech world.

But as long as it's still green the future is always bright, so never neglect to water. In the last few years my impression has been that interest in bonsai is noticeably picking up. A new spring is coming. The sprout is growing. I see many new and younger faces at conventions now. I get phone calls from people who are really excited, obsessed even, with bonsai. And I share the feeling.

There are new teachers who have had formal training in bonsai in Japan and elsewhere. They are younger, and their students are younger, and they showed up just in time. And meanwhile groups like ABS, BCI and others have been working hard to promote the art and make it accessible to those who might like it. And there are many professionals who have devoted a large part of their life to teaching and sharing their knowledge.

And it's working; at least I think it's working. I attended two shows this year; the ABS Symposium in Ellicott City and the Midwest Bonsai Show in Chicago, and the energy at both of them was great. The U. S. National Exhibition in Rochester last fall was really fantastic. And the much-anticipated Artisans Cup is coming up in just a few weeks. I'm expecting it will be a mind-blowing bonsai show.

I love being at a show and talking with other people who are excited about bonsai and plants. I love the community of bonsai people and being part of it. When I first started my sole focus was on bonsai trees and how to get a couple great ones. But as time has gone on I've realized that things are just more fun and meaningful when they involve other people, and I've come to value the bonsai community more and more.

I suppose bonsai will always be somewhat of a niche interest. It may never have the mass appeal of something like "Angry Birds," and that's fine. But it will be more enduring and I think it will continue to grow in popularity. I'm optimistic about it. As long as it's green, the future is always bright.