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# bc*i*

# Bonsai & Stone Appreciation

2020  
**Q2**



Winner of the Nomination  
award of the bonsai  
pot exhibition: Bonsai  
Association Belgium's The  
Trophy 2020.

Guido Pozzoli, Italy. A round  
bowl with crystalline glaze  
made by Terre en Vadrouille.  
Photo by Jörg Derlien.

#### THE TROPHY 2020, BELGIUM

LIKE SUNLIGHT ON BONSAI: REMEMBERING SOLITA TAFUR ROSADE

VISITING A GRAND MASTER OF BONSAI IN TAIWAN: LEE, CHONG HONG

CREATIVE IDEAS FOR USING IRON SLAG WASTE

AT THE WHIM OF TIME AND WEATHER: *JUNIPERUS SABINA* 'L'ARCIGNO'

EL JENTILAK DEL NORD: A YEW FROM NORTHERN SPAIN

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*“Critical to any world-class Bonsai are the tools and other supporting elements.” – Ryan Neil*

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## President's Message



**O**ur BCI members and friends around the world are facing some very difficult times. I'm asking you to keep in touch with our BCI community. We are all in this together and need to support one another to the best of our ability. While you may feel isolated and alone, you are not. The bonsai and stone community are united in their passion, and we can all help keep spirits up in these challenging times. If you can't communicate with your bonsai family and friends in person, keep in contact by phone or social media.

This is a great time to get your bonsai collection looking good. Take some photos and share on Facebook or Instagram and get suggestions or advice from others.

Why not create a video for submission to the BCI video competition. Hey, it doesn't have to be a winning entry. It could be something we can share with our membership on Facebook or our website.

There is still time to enter the tree and stone competition. Prize money is \$525 for the tree and \$250 for the stone. Go to the website and take a look at the entries so far. BCI Members will be the ones judging this competition. If you don't want to enter the contest, just send us photos of your trees or stones that we can share on Facebook with our members.

Another thing to do to keep busy—think about writing an article for BCI magazine or website. This can be on any style, species, or event. Photos need to be high resolution in JPG or TIF format. Images with 3,000 pixels or larger in width or height are preferred.

Unfortunately, most of the bonsai and stone events internationally have been canceled or postponed. BCI has postponed the Korean Regional Convention scheduled for May. We will make a decision in June on the Indonesia BCI Regional planned for August. We'll keep you updated on the main event, the BCI annual convention scheduled for Washington DC, in October. Things are changing daily, and we will make a decision as the situation changes, to ensure we all stay safe.

The BCI website has been updated with a new easy find look. The members-only area has lots of educational information. Check out the species guide. If you're an experienced Horticulturist, you may be able to help us add to this extensive lists. Want something to read? Members can also download back copies of BCI Bonsai and Stone Magazine back to Q1, 2011.

Are you having trouble accessing the members' area? Your email address should be your username. If you've forgotten your password or user name, click "Login" (yellow bar on Home Page) and then "Forgot Login" and follow the prompts. Still having problems, contact us at [office@bonsai-bci.com](mailto:office@bonsai-bci.com). BCI website: [www.bonsai-bci.com](http://www.bonsai-bci.com)

Stay safe and stay connected.

Cheers from Down Under,  
Glenis Bebb

**Why not create a video for submission to the BCI video competition. Hey, it doesn't have to be a winning entry. It could be something we can share with our membership on Facebook or our website.**

*You are invited to be a part of the BCI Vision.*

**We are raising funds for the future of BCI!  
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*Remember BCI in your will, your trust, your future!*

For more information contact:

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## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

**A**s I write this column, most countries are experiencing moderate to severe coronavirus infections in their population. Governments everywhere have advised that we practice social distancing to curb the rate of infection. As we adapt to the solitude imposed by these uncertain times, we can find comfort in our favorite pastimes. While most bonsai club activities are suspended for the time being, there are many resources to keep us engaged and progressing with our interests. In this regard, I hope this issue of *BCI Bonsai & Stone Appreciation* magazine can help. A variety of articles that range from reports on recent conventions to topics that show how bonsai artists are creating magnificent bonsai specimens are sure to inspire.

In the first article, Gudrun Benz, with the collaboration of Bonsai Association Belgium (BAB), reports on The Trophy 2020, one of the top bonsai attractions in Europe. The success of the event and the professional documentation of the exceptional works on exhibit continue to enhance The Trophy's status in the international bonsai community. The sublime effect of the glaze on Guido Pozzoli's winning entry in The Trophy 2020 pot exhibit, curated by Alex Ruud, took my breath away. I was moved to feature this work of art on the cover of this issue.

BCI director Enrique Castaño reports on Bonsai in Latin America as a way of honoring Solita Tafur Rosade for her leadership and positive influence in the Latino bonsai community.

Contributing editor Budi Sulistyو traveled to Thailand and shows us the progress and beauty of Suanphung Bonsai Village. He also reports on his visit with master Chong Hong Lee, a bonsai artist and pioneer in Taiwan, who is creating exceptional masterpiece bonsai.

Jyoti and Nikunj Parekh from India discovered a big pile of iron slag at a steel-producing industry and put select pieces to good use. These expert saikei creators show us their beautiful compositions that combine plants, flowers, moss, and iron slag.

Bonsai artists Massimo Bandera, Raúl Alcalá Bermúdez, Bruno Proietti Tocca, and Mauro Stemberger, each present unique bonsai specimens where step-by-step, they show us how they style and refine them to create amazing compositions.

If you have practiced bonsai for any length of time, you know that the growing medium you use is critical for the health of your plants. Bonsai grower and teacher Rajeev Vaidya from India spent countless hours researching this topic. The result is a very detailed essay on bonsai soil and how it is used around the world.

Be sure to look at Bonsai Empire's new course offering on Deciduous Bonsai Development. I did, and now I look forward to the growing season with renewed motivation and optimism. In bonsai, there is always something new to learn. 🌳

—Joe Grande, Canada ([editor@bonsai-bci.com](mailto:editor@bonsai-bci.com))

## MISSION STATEMENT

BONSAI CLUBS INTERNATIONAL

Bonsai Clubs International, a not-for-profit educational organization, advances the ancient and living art of bonsai and related arts through the global sharing of knowledge. We educate while promoting international friendship and solidify world relationships through cooperation with individuals and organizations whose purpose is consistent with ours.

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Authors are requested not to submit articles simultaneously to another publication.

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Issue	Month	Closing Date
Q1	J/F/M	November 1
Q2	A/M/J	February 1
Q3	J/A/S	May 1
Q4	O/N/D	August 1



# Bonsai & Stone Appreciation

VOLUME 59 NUMBER 2

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# inside Q2 2020

## EXHIBITS AND CONVENTIONS

- 3 The Trophy 2020, Belgium**  
By Gudrun Benz, Germany and Christian Vos, Belgium

## PEOPLE

- 22 Like Sunlight on Bonsai: Remembering Solita Tafur Rosade**  
By Enrique Castaño, BCI Director, Mexico
- 40 Visiting a Grand Master of Bonsai in Taiwan: Lee, Chong Hong**  
By Budi Sulisty, Indonesia, Contributing author: José Luis Rodríguez Macias

## ARTICLES

- 17 Creative Ideas for Using Iron Slag Waste**  
By Jyoti and Nikunj Parekh, India
- 32 At the Whim of Time and Weather: *Juniperus sabina* 'L'Arcigno'**  
By Bruno Proietti Tocca, Italy
- 46 El Jentilak del Nord: A Yew From Northern Spain**  
By Massimo Bandera, Italy, and Raúl Alcalá Bermúdez, Spain
- 50 Visiting Suanphung Bonsai Village**  
By Budi Sulisty, Indonesia
- 56 The Lore and Lure of Bonsai Soil**  
By Rajeev Vaidya, India
- 65 Online Bonsai Education: Developing Deciduous Bonsai**  
By Joe Grande, Canada
- 66 Vigorous, strong, flexible, and excellent: Colorado Blue Spruce**  
By Mauro Stemberger, Italy

FEATURED ON THE COVER: Winner of the Nomination award of the bonsai pot exhibition The Trophy 2020: Guido Pozzoli, Italy. A round bowl with crystalline glaze made by Terre en Vadrouille. Photo by Jörg Derlien.



One of the most prestigious international bonsai shows in Europe

# THE TROPHY 2020 BELGIUM



By Gudrun Benz,  
Germany,  
Christian Vos, Belgium

Photos by Willy  
Evenepoel,  
Marc Debeule  
and Jörg Derlien,  
Courtesy BAB.

Additional  
suiseki photos by  
Gudrun Benz





**A**s in the past several years, the famous BAB (Bonsai Association Belgium) The Trophy 2020 was held at the congress center of Limburghal in Genk, Belgium. The city of Genk is situated in the Belgium province Limburg, which is close to the northern German border. It was known for coal mines at the beginning of the 20th century. But in the second half of the 20th century, the coal mines closed down, and a new industry developed with the Ford Motor Company.

This year's The Trophy 2020 took place on 29 February–1 March, an unusually late date for this event, which is generally held a month earlier. Luckily the event was scheduled just before the rigorous restrictions imposed on people in most European countries to control the coronavirus when all gatherings and events were canceled. This year's Trophy, with 5,000 visitors, was another success with a higher number of visitors than the previous edition.

Since the 10th anniversary of the event in 2009, a catalog was published each year featuring the bonsai and suiseki exhibition, the bonsai demonstrations, and the social program. Since the first convention, Willy Evenepoel was the photographer of the exhibits and Marc Debeule of the bonsai demonstrations. They were joined by Jörg Derlien in the last few years because it wasn't possible to professionally photograph all entries the day before the opening when the exhibition was set up. Two years ago, an exhibition of bonsai pots was added. Each year a unique trophy is created by an artist. This year's trophies for the winners were handmade by the Belgium artist/blacksmith Roger Swings. Prizes for the best bonsai, suiseki, and bonsai pots are much sought after. The winners of the bonsai prizes are selected by a jury composed of the demonstrators present. They receive a list with different categories: bonsai (over 35 cm h), kifu (21–35 cm h), and shohin (less than 21 cm h). Besides the winning trees, there are second and third prizes for each category, called Nominations. At the time of judging, the bonsai are labeled with the name of the owner and the country of origin. Still, BAB is convinced that the judges have enough professionalism to disregard this. BAB doesn't have any influence in this judging process and receives the final scores from the



jury. Bonsai from the museum Alcobendas, Madrid, and shohin from the private collection of Alexander Escudero were exhibited out of the competition.

There were 131 bonsai, 23 suiseki, and 80 exclusive pots from Japan, China, and Europe in the exhibition. Alex Ruud organized the bonsai pot exhibition, and Holger Göbel, Germany, took care of the suiseki exhibition. There was only one nomination for the best bonsai pot and one nomination for suiseki. The Nomination award for bonsai pots went to Guido Pozzoli, Italy—a round bowl with a crystalline glaze made by Terre en Vadrouille. The nomination for suiseki was presented to Daniela Schifano, Italy, for a kibune-ishii (43 x 19.5 x 15 cm) from Japan called “Spring Mountain.” This year's bonsai demonstrators were Minoru Akiyama from Japan, Ryan Neil from the USA, Mauro Stemberger from Italy, Tony Tickle from the United Kingdom, and Alexandre Escudero from France. Luigi Maggioni from Italy gave a lecture on shohin.

Another attraction of The Trophy is the significant number of traders from all countries of Europe, 120 at this event. They offered everything related to bonsai: bonsai, suiseki, books, magazines, accent plants, accessories (tempai), scrolls, tools, bonsai pots. I was amazed at how many ceramists and traders selling bonsai pots offered mostly beautiful, sometimes antique pots of all sizes. Visitors who are looking for their needs come mainly on Saturday when the choice is still high.

Lastly, the team of the BAB deserves respect for the organization and setting up the exhibition facilities. The active members of the organization can be very proud of their achievement for organizing such a big event, which once more was a big success. The Trophy 2021 will be held on 20–21 February 2021 at the same place as this year. 🌳

This year every one in the audience could see the details of the demos thanks to a big screen and professional camera men.

An other important part of The Trophy is the Bonsai Supermarket where 120 traders from all countries of Europe, and even Frank Mihalic from the USA, offered everything related to Bonsai, Suiseki, books, magazines. Some of them were sold out before the end of the show.





**Saturday afternoon**

**Mauro Stemberger (Italy)** worked on a *Pinus sylvestris yamadori* collected in the Alps in Italy (with authorization, of course) and was already in a pot for 5 years. It's a huge tree, the trunk is 40 cm and weighs around 100 kilo. It is growing well, developing new foliage every year, ready to style. The total length of the trunk from base to top is 5.5 meters (yes, we checked it), winding 180 degrees with much movement.

It took Mauro 45 minutes to decide for the front and the inclination. The assistant started to remove the old needles, and Mauro decided to shorten the trunk by 2 meters. There was still enough foliage to keep the tree healthy. The first part of the demo is to make the tree more compact.

Making it smaller involved heavy bending after the necessary raffia, wiring, and guy wires to bend the trunk. Then the main branches are bent in the right position by tie wires only.



Now follows the classical wiring and positioning of the smaller branches—not so small in this «monster bonsai»

Mauro explains that it will still take five years more to make a finished bonsai out of this project. He will do it step by step: secondary styling, maybe another front



side will be chosen, no Shari or Saba Miki will be done. The actual pot is a good one for further training.

Of course, a definitive Pot will be selected afterward. Now the tree is healthy, and Mauro wants to keep it that way for excellent results at the end.



**Minoru Akiyama (Japan)** worked on *Taxus cuspidata* imported years ago from Japan. This tree has been styled before but not maintained. It has a heavy trunk, with a large Shari merging into Saba Miki.

On the upper side is a cluster of branches, deadwood, and the trunk at this point has an inverse taper with many new branches that are now too thick to be bent. The branches are too long with the new foliage at the tips. Not an easy job. Minoru takes his time and works systematically. His focus is on the trunk; therefore, he selects the front side to emphasize the shari, modifying the angle slightly using a wedge.

Now the massive upper part is cleaned, removing deadwood and branches. The left side has the main branch, the right side is the top. The next step is to select the remaining branches. Half of the heavy ones are removed. More light is coming inside the tree, and this allows new foliage to grow.

Using copper wire of 5 millimeter and guy wires to

bring the branches down and shorten too long branches results in inner and more compact foliage. Smaller branches are left as they are. These are something to style after two years to keep the tree in good health.

The Sashi-Eda or main branch is bent upwards to make a new apex. Maybe next year is the right moment to clean and finalize the deadwood.

Repotting in a bonsai pot can be done at one or two points given Minoru does not know the condition of the roots.

*Taxus* generally grows well, and therefore it is essential to select and wire the correct new branches. This *Taxus* also needs some time to be finalized, as always in bonsai keeping the tree healthy is most important. The result shows a bright future for this project.

We also thank Peter Warren for his assistance and professional translation of Japanese into English.







**Ryan Neil (USA)** and his team work on a *Juniperus sabina*, a Yamadori from Spain. This Sabina is in its pot for four-to-five years and is in excellent health.

Sabinas are appreciated for their movement and natural deadwood. But styling is limited by the fact that the movement of the trunk and the deadwood can seldom be modified. Ryan selects the best front and inclination to emphasize the deadwood.

He decides for an inclination of nearly 60 degrees. The shari at the base of the trunk merges into a Jin coming over the edge of the pot. The heavy Jin that was a second trunk previously is now perfectly visible.

Selecting the best front, the perfect inclination and emphasizing the Jin was, as Ryan explains, the most important part of the demo. Not in terms of time but of aesthetics. The rest is applying technique, the traditional part of the job, but of course important too.

Because of the modification of the angle, he used a branch in the back to make the new apex, but the two trunks are not in the right position.



To modify their position by wiring is not a solution; the trunks are too thick. To avoid damage, Ryan applies guy wires. An iron bar is needed to attach the guy wires. With much care, trunks are little by little brought in an adequate position.

The deadwood and living lines are cleaned, and Jin product is applied to highlight the deadwood. During the rest of the styling, the Jin product dries to show the beautiful deadwood, which is an essential part of the Sabina.

The main branches are in place; the wood is cleaned, time to wire in detail each branch. Spreading the foliage to allow the light to develop the new foliage is necessary for *Juniperus*. The result is a nearly finished bonsai. As a future pot, Ryan recommends a symmetrical pot, maybe in lotus shape.

Great Job.



**Tony Tickle (UK)** works on a yamadori *Pinus sylvestris*. This Sylvestris has a quite long trunk with much movement and not many branches.

The three first branches were cut off at the first potting. In fact, the material could be used to make a bunjin out of it, but in the end, it's not Tony's intention. Given the bend at the base, the best option is to create a Kangai, but with bunjin character. The tree has not much foliage, wiring and spreading the small branches will result in extra foliage.

The surprise: when repotting, Tony uses a beautiful lava rock from Scotland. The "pot" has been prepared in advance; holes were already drilled. Usual soil mixture was used for repotting; the tree was well secured. A finishing layer of keto is applied to keep everything in place since it's not a traditional pot, with moss on top as the final touch.



Now comes another surprise; a steel skeleton with two pins covered with back fabric.

The rock rests on the two nearly invisible pins and creates a floating bonsai.

The idea is to give the impression of a bonsai floating in the air—a special effect, not traditional.







**Sunday afternoon**

**Mauro Stemberger** worked on a *Juniperus chinensis* "Ito-gawa"

This tree is a yamadori from Japan, which Mauro bought years ago. The original foliage was quite rough. Mauro cultivated more than 100 young Ito-gawa cuttings and grafted them on this tree 5 years ago to get better foliage.

Afterward, all the original foliage was removed. The grafting was a success, and no wounds are left. The trunk originally had a shari, a wide living line, and a Jin with beautiful movement.

The three assistants start to clean the deadwood, reducing the foliage, and then apply wire: this takes 3 hours.

Now the assistants disappear, and Mauro himself finalizes the positioning of the branches, shortening some twigs, checking and correcting each detail. A new bonsai is born.



Of course, it will require some final cleaning of the deadwood, repotting in a dedicated pot.

As always, a bonsai is never finished.



**Minoru Akiyama** worked on a *Picea glehnii*

The demo tree is an old Sakhalin spruce, a yamadori from the northern part of Japan.

This bonsai had been styled different times already, then left unattended and lost his beauty. Too many branches have grown at the upper part and make the top looking too heavy, but Minoru likes the tree.

As usual, Minoru looks for the best front and the right inclination. The longer branch on the left side will be the Sashi-Eda. On the right side, there are too many branches. A cluster of twigs and dead branches are at the upper part of the tree.

At this point, Minoru turns the tree 180 degrees. The first front chosen becomes the backside.

Most probably, Minoru had this already in his mind from the beginning.

What was the right side is cleaned, twigs are shortened, other branches become jins.

With much care, Minoru selects the branches and twigs to shorten or to be cut, making the bonsai look much more elegant, lighter.

The reason to carefully select the branches and twigs to be reduced is that compared to Taxus, it is not so easy for Picea, to get new growth on older branches.

Also, the wiring is done with great care, and each branch is placed in the correct position. After the wiring, only little has to be corrected.

Picea is very sensitive to dry air and the heat of the spotlights. Minoru sprays some water over the bonsai to humidify the whole foliage.

Minoru achieved excellent results and a beautiful, elegant bonsai.







**Ryan Neil's** subject was a mugo pine

This tree has a story: Ryan did the first styling five years ago at a previous Trophy. It's an old heavy Yamadori, dug out of the Alps in Italy.

At the first styling, the long trunk was shortened and bent by hollowing the trunk. The main branches were brought down.

The tree was left for five years to grow and to get more twigs, but nothing was done to reduce the length of the needles. The result is a quite compact and healthy tree.

Time for a second styling.

Ryan wants to bend the trunk a little more and to bend the thick branches downward. Again an iron bar has to be fixed to fasten the necessary guy wires.

It takes some time to bend the thick branches without damage.

The assistants remove a part of the needles while Ryan trims branches that are too long.

Now follows the classical wiring, with copper wire.

Branches and twigs are set in a way to place focus on the trunk. The bonsai is inclined to the front to create more depth.

The future:

First: repotting into a bonsai pot must probably be done in two steps depending on the rootball. Probably a rectangular unglazed pot will be the best. Secondly: refining the deadwood. The existing deadwood must remain untouched. Let Mother Nature and time make it better. It is the artist's task to finish the new deadwood at the base to look like the existing dead part. Only aging makes the new deadwood match the old one.

Finally: Refine the position of the branches and new twigs and cultivate it in a way to get shorter needles.

This demo was a "next step," but the result will be a masterpiece.



**Tony Tickle** worked on *Taxus baccata* that was dug out somewhere in the UK and has previously been worked.

There is only one long side branch with only a few twigs. There are also a few Jin, and the tree lays completely horizontal.

The first idea, maybe Fukinagashi, but not at all, Tony wants to make a han kengai. The only branch is flat, everything is quite compact, nearly a pancake. Creating a three-dimensional design is the goal.

First, Tony puts the tree in another position, more downward; this makes a Cascade design possible.

Some movement is given by wiring the living part. The end of the branch is brought back upwards.

Finally, all the secondary branches and twigs are wired and set in the correct position to create more volume.

As on Saturday, Tony used a lava stone (volcanic) from Scotland as a pot. Holes were already drilled before.



The repotting, finalizing with Keto to keep the soil in place and applying moss as finishing touch, takes only 15 minutes. The bonsai and stone are well balanced.

Future: Let it grow, to get more volume, wiring new twigs and trimming.



## The Trophy Exhibits

Nomination: "Spring Mountain," Five-color mountain stone, origin: Kibune, Japan, dimensions: 43 x 19.5 x 15 cm. Owner: Daniela Schifano, Italy



Mountain stone; Setagawa ishi, Japan, dimensions: 50 x 21 x 14 cm. Owner: Bonsaimuseum Heidelberg



Plateau stone, Setagawa ishi, Japan, dimensions: 21 x 10 x 10 cm. Owner: Holger Göbel, Germany



Gobi desert "Bonsai" stone of Daan Giphart and Hong Wan



Chrysanthemum stone of Gudrun Benz, dimensions: 24 x 9 x 14 cm, origin: Japan





Winner in the category conifers: José Luis Crespo, Spain. *Pinus sylvestris*, Bankan style. Pot: Gyozan.





Winner in the category broad leaved: Teunis Jan Klein, Netherlands. *Euonymus*, Moyogi style. Pot: Tokoname.







Winner in the category Shohin : Mark and Ritta Cooper, United Kingdom.

*Pinus parviflora*, *Acer palmatum*, *Pyracantha angustifolia*, *Trachelospermum asiaticum nana*, *Zelkova serrata*.



Left: Nomination Kifu: Teunis Jan Klein, Netherlands. *Ulmus nigra*, Moyogi style. Pot: Klika & Kuratkova.

Above: Nomination Kifu: Mauro Scotti, Italy. *Larix decidua*, Moyogi style. Pot: China.





Above: Nomination Shohin: Carlos Fernández De Betoño, Spain. *Rosmarinus officinalis*, right, *Ulmus parviflora*, left.

Below: Winner in the category Kifu (UBE award): Udo Fischer, Germany. *Magnolia stellata*, Moyogi style. Pot: old Chinese.







Above: Nomination Bunjin: Geremías Martín Harnan, Spain. *Quercus humilis*, Bujin style. Pot: Carles Vives.

Below: Nomination conifer (special prize from Akina): Lorenzo Agnoletti, Italy. *Larix decidua*, Kengai style. Pot: Japan.



Above: Nomination Conifer: Gabriel Romero Aguade, Spain. *Pinus sylvestris*, Shakan. Pot: Old Chinese.

Below: Nomination Conifer: Marco Giannini, Italy. *Juniperus chinensis*, Kishu Moyogi. Pot: Gregory Delattre.







*Top left:* Nomination Conifer:  
Ruben Ciezar Villanueva, Spain  
*Taxus baccata*, Kengai style.  
Pot: Senshu.

*Top right:* Special prize from  
Bonsai Art Magazine. Wilfried  
Nieswandt, Germany. *Acer  
palmatum*, Moyogi style Pot:  
Tokoname.

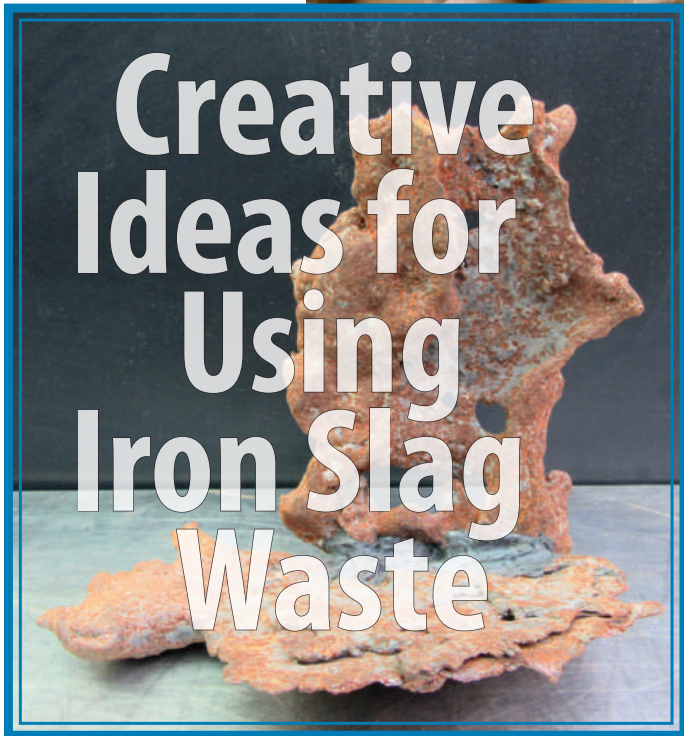
*Middle right:* Nomination:  
Marco Giannini, Italy. *Quercus  
ilex*, Moyogi style.

*Bottom:* Best of Bonsai  
Association Belgium: Alda  
Clijsters, Belgium. *Pinus mugo*,  
Yose-ue style. Pot: Tokoname.





# Creative Ideas for Using Iron Slag Waste



By Jyoti and Nikunj Parekh, India

**N**ikunj and I had been commissioned to make a Japanese Garden in an Indian setting for a large steel manufacturing industry in India. We were taken around by the officials to see the manufacturing processes and also their greening efforts.

While passing through, we saw heaps of Iron slag waste stored in mounds and being inquisitive to the core, both of us requested the car to stop. We ventured to climb up the mound with the help of the security personnel, and with the acute observation power of Bonsai hobbyists/artists we started collecting a few pieces of Iron slag waste with the necessary permission of industry officials.

The industry we were at, manufactures iron from iron ore. Iron Slag comes out as a waste product that is repeatedly melted but only a small percentage gets reprocessed.

Carrying the pieces back to Mumbai was full of childlike curiosity for both of us.

On a leisure day, we sorted them out and arranged the pieces upside down or at an angle for viewing. A few of the pieces collected looked like art pieces!

We created a few arrangement ideas for small greenery plantings to be shared here. A large container-like slag waste got used as a backdrop with smaller pieces used to create small-sized containers. We used both slow gelling epoxy glue as well as quick setting synthetic adhesive to join the pieces of Iron slag waste as per design.

To join the pieces, we made use of a turntable and to continually view the safe joining as per the design. The large piece thus created was used to plant small *Juniperus rigida* rooted cuttings duly shaped and wired.

Few small *Serissa serrisoides* rooted cuttings were used in the foreground. Ground covers, grasses, fillers, and fresh green moss were added to finish the arrangement.



A large container-like slag waste got used as a backdrop with smaller pieces used to create small-sized containers.



Jyoti and Nikunj Parekh showed their appreciative study group in Mumbai, step-by-step, how to create a saikei planting using iron slag pieces from a steel-making industry.



The planting have withstood a tropical winter, spring season, and also an Indian summer. The use of sticky bonsai soil for complete coverage of all roots is necessary for nourishment. The planting was finally covered with a layer of finely shredded sphagnum moss and green moss secured with thin anodized wire U-clips. The arrangement is thoroughly watered with a fine shower daily in the mornings before the heat of the day.

Similarly, smaller iron slag waste pieces were used to design smaller complementary planting by using Kusamono, succulents, and colorful fillers. Even small fresh flowers were arranged in yet another original container.

Currently, with the COVID-19 scare spreading across the world, the time has come to be stress-free and live in Peace and Harmony amongst the homemade creations of Iron Slag Waste mixed with greenery, enjoying our hobby. 🌿







The use of sticky bonsai soil for complete coverage of all roots is necessary for nourishment. The planting was finally covered with a layer of finely shredded sphagnum moss and green moss secured with thin anodized wire U-clips.



Small fresh flowers were arranged in yet another original container







**The planting have withstood a tropical winter, spring season, and also an Indian summer.**







## Like Sunlight on Bonsai Remembering Solita Tafur Rosade

By Enrique Castaño,  
BCI Director, Mexico

Photos courtesy Enrique  
Castaño, Chase Rosade,  
Nacho Marin, Sergio  
Luciani and Nelson  
Hernández

**T**his article is a short dedication to our good friend Solita Tafur Rosade. I wish we had more time to talk. Soli, you shed light on many of us and created the Latin American Bonsai movement. I would like to show everyone how we are progressing. Thanks for every kind word.

A few months ago, the passing of an extraordinary person took place: Solita Tafur Rosade, or as we used to call her, Soli. I met her for the first time in Germany during the world convention, where she was a headliner, setting a place for women in Bonsai. In the world of Bonsai, there have been very few examples of extraordinary women that dare to promote this particular art form. The truth is that even now, this art form is mostly dominated by men. However, Solita did play a big part in improving this situation. She also achieved another great task, and that was to create a voice for the Latin American bonsai to be heard on the world arena. She convinced people to bring teachers from abroad and

for us to go out into the world. There is no greater experience and joy in the art than to share our creations with pride and to learn and improve ourselves. Soli did manage to seek those with the desire to be more than just local gardeners and promote them to be more. She had experience with all major and prestigious bonsai organizations. From FELAB, which she created, to BCI and WBFF, that at one point or another served as president and traveled throughout the world, always learning and giving praise. From the few times that I manage to spend time with her, one of the most memorable ones was on a BCI tour through China. This tour, organized in part by IC Su, was a really enjoyable experience as we traveled to several cities and fantastic locations in China. During that time, I found Soli to be a very enthusiastic traveler. Always looking for the best in people and welcomed with appreciation, the exhibits wherever we went. She was not blind to the improvements that could be made. But she did not fuss over them. Instead, she looked at the





positive aspects. Chase Rosade, her husband, made a perfect complement, and it was fantastic to travel with them. It was always nice to see her in meetings around the world. From Puerto Rico to Italy and obviously in Mexico. Even though she lived in the US for many years, her Latino roots continued to grow because her creation was the Latin Federation of Bonsai. I thought it would be worthwhile for other regions in the world to see how Latin American Bonsai has evolved in the last few years. Here, many artists share a few of their trees, showing their artistry as a way to honor her legacy. I think she would have enjoyed this. Thank you, Soli, for all you have done, we will continue improving.

### Bonsai In Latin America

The art of bonsai in Latin America took root in Mexico over a hundred years ago. A Japanese Bonsai artist Tatsugoro Matsumoto was invited to create a Japanese garden in the castle of Chapultepec in Mexico City. He liked the country and decided to move to Mexico and work on several gardens of politicians and wealthy people. He introduced a few bonsai and started working on plant species from different parts of Latin America, like bougainvillea. However, the knowledge was not diffused to most of the people and ultimately had very little influence. It was in the late eighties that several people from different parts began not only to practice the art but also to teach others. The first one is Chery Cortes, who has taught the art of bonsai for more than sixty years. A friend of John Naka for several decades and a well-respected artist in Mexico, she helped establish a bonsai community in Guadalajara that still continues today. In other parts of the country, Guillermo Castaño, Ramiro Blancarte, and Emigdio Trujillo were among the first people to continue teaching this art and eventually formed the federation of clubs in Mexico. Currently, the Tatsugoro Bonsai Museum is one of the best in Latin America. It has focused on promoting bonsai art by bringing talented artists from all over the world to improve the level of this art form. Other parts of Latin America also advanced significantly. At first, in Venezuela, Milagros Rauber, and currently, Nacho Marin, who for many years have promoted bonsai and have improved the quality of bonsai in this region. During the last few years, it has become difficult in this country. However, there are still bonsai artists whose art



*Facing page:* Solita in Jyoti and Nikunj Parekh's garden in India.

*Top left:* Solita with long-time friend Kunio Kobayashi.

*Top right:* Solita speaking at the All-India convention in 2015.

*Middle:* Solita and Chase at Expo 2010. Photo by Laura Gutierrez

keeps on improving. Brazil is now one of the countries Latin America leading in bonsai art. Several people are very devoted to improving their technique and have one of the best Bonsai Museum in the region. They host an excellent event every year that, in time, may have the international appeal of Noelanders Trophy.

Argentina has also been the home of several well-known artists like Sergio Luciani. He has traveled extensively and, in the last decade, has created an excellent movement in the region—always with good humor—trying to understand the aesthetics needed for a good display. In Costa Rica, Juan Andrade, a former student of Kobayashi, has come back after his studies and is moving the artistic level to new heights. Puerto Rico has had a rich experience in the last few years. Promoters of the art like Pedro Morales or Nelson Hernandez have made Puerto Rico one of the best-known places for bonsai in Latin America. They favor a traditional style, taking advantage of local species, like *Neea* and *Conocarpus erectus*. Other countries like Costa Rica, Colombia, Peru, and Panama are beginning to explore the art of bonsai, taking advantage of the Latin Federation of Bonsai that was founded by Soli. It is because of her that I decided to show a few of the current people involved in this art and a few examples of their work so they can be seen worldwide.

Enrique Castaño, a second-generation bonsai artist, was introduced to Bonsai and the horticultural world



Top row, left to right:

Enrique Castaño, Mexico

Nacho Marin, Venezuela

Sergio Luciani, Argentina

Germán Arellano, Colombia

Nelson Hernandez, Puerto Rico

Rico



**“The FELAB people and the bonsai world will never forget you. Thank you very much for a lot.”**

**Nacho Marin**

at an early age. His love for nature led to his studies in biology, and he subsequently received a PhD in Biochemistry and Biophysics from the University of Rochester (NY) in 1997. He has done a post-doctoral in Harvard and MCRI in England. He is currently a professor at the plant research center in Merida. He uses his educational background to promote Bonsai throughout the world. Sharing his knowledge in bonsai, from aesthetics to philosophy and science, he teaches and gives demonstrations around the world—China, Taiwan, UK, USA, Czech Republic, Mexico, Lithuania. He has written many articles for various magazines—*BCI Bonsai & Stone Appreciation*, *Bonsai Today*, *Bonsai Focus*, *Journal of the American Bonsai Society*, *International Bonsai*. His trees were awarded by the World Bonsai Friendship Federation and BCI. He has also won various prizes including the John Naka Award, Chase Rosade Award, Mexico Best Design Award, Awards by FELAB, Gold and Silver medals in Bonsai Olympics of WBFF, 3rd prize, the Isamel Saleh Bonsai Photo Contest, Gold Award Penjing in China, the WBFF Chairman Emeritus Award and numerous first place in design awards by ofBonsai. He was part of the editors of *Art of Bonsai and Knowledge of Bonsai*. In 2010 he was the chairman for FELAB, organizing several regional events. His book *Botany for Bonsai: The Science Behind the Art* serves as a building block for Bonsai horticulture.

### **From Nacho Marin, Venezuela**

#### *Friends of a lot and of a little*

Meeting you by chance adds up to a little and a lot. It was one of those casual things, one of those unpredictable and, at the same time, inevitable things that life has to offer.

A path of encounters and conversations in hallways, elevators, the lobbies, the expo entry, walking by with the group, or on those endless minutes standing on airport lines on our way to some long flight to Asia. Confederate glances between a nobody and a woman that always represented us well, in crowded places and beautiful trees. Those are the best memories of my dear friend.

Bright eyes full of a green and mischievous sense of Colombian humor packed with the closeness of sibling countries—Colombia and Venezuela—with just a stare we had no need to talk. I remember very clearly that

first time we met in the gardens of the Contemporary Art Museum in Caracas when celebrating FELAB 2003. Someone who had just arrived was watering the bonsai scattered throughout the museum gardens in a very naïve manner, and suddenly, this lady daringly gets on his path on her way to the almost 3 meters long forest, looking at him with a peaceful and pleasant face expression. At that moment her face went into an interrogative expression and naughty look that I will never forget. “Is it nice, do you enjoy it?” and with that great Colombian-style expression that I recognized immediately, I answered, yes, thank you very much, it is mine. Of course, I had no idea who she was ha, ha, ha!!!

That’s how I met you, politically correct, formally dressed, which has always scared me (of course, I hate politics). With that composure of someone who knew what she was doing, never asking me to do that what was appropriate for me, instead, Soli ordered it (and no answering back).

I don’t really know how you did it. If you appeared intentionally or were just prowling around, never missing an important event in my professional career. Much good news always came from you, along with accurate advice.

That day you called me with your usual strong nature and told me something that had no return. While you talked, I listened, breaking inside, you were saying goodbye, and more presents came from you. I was privileged to be the one you shared that solemn news with and informed me of a new friend that you were leaving as the substitute for your future absence.

I remember you with great affection. The FELAB people and the bonsai world will never forget you. Thank you very much for a lot.

### **From Sergio Luciani, Argentina**

#### *Solita no Kokoro*

It was during a senior bonsai competition that I meet Solita, around November 2008. In a strained situation, she came close and asked me what had happened and listened carefully to my explanation. In a very relaxed way, she put a hand on my shoulder and said in a phrase that still resonates. “Relax Sergio, even in the middle of all this, you keep working, you choose art! And you know why? Because you have what we call ‘Bonsai no Kokoro’ Heart, spirit, soul, and mind together in bonsai. For the bonsai... relax, everything is OK.” As the years





passed, during the times we shared at similar events, the conversations became more intimate and familiar. Bonsai was the frame, and little by little, we created a friendship offered by those unique moments. Talking in the lobby of some hotel in China, India, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, every time there was the same smile and shine in her eyes when we met.

I remember during a demo I was doing in India, a person gave me a note on a piece of paper. Solita indicated with the signals that I should read it. She was in the audience, seated in the first row. The note said “relax, you are doing well, Bonsai no Kokoro.”

The years that I have practiced bonsai has given me many new friends and people with similar ideals. So I became close to FELAB and discovered different versions of the passion in this art. Solita was there, giving guidance, teaching, and explaining together with Pedro. This was the biggest network for Latin America, and it gave us security as well as pushed to become better over time.

We managed to talk about lots of topics, politics, the changes paradigm in the world of bonsai, always with her way of listening, gave me the trust to tell her about my ideas. She did not argue, she just heard and put her mind to work. If she did not agree on something, she would tell me, and we would figure out how to solve it.

Just to go through her curricula generates a Latino pride, and I talk about Latino pride because, for us, there is only one Latin American. Like any organization, we had fights and discussions, but under this inherent condition, Solita was our guide. She organized us and taught the world of bonsai, she defended it as places and opportunities for the new and old artists. She was always attentive, gentle, and generous.

A few days before her departure, we talked for more than two hours. We laughed a lot, and she told me that laughing with me always made her feel better. She never showed remorse or sadness. She would talk about Chase and that they would be waiting for me so we could work together and have fun doing bonsai.

Thank you, dear Solita, from my part and without a doubt from all bonsai in Latin America. You managed to transfer the feeling of one being part of everything! And to feel bonsai in your heart, spirit, soul, and mind.

*Bonsai no Kokoro querida Soli.*

*Solita no Kokoro. Te quiero.*

### **From Germán Arellano, Colombia**

#### *The Lady of Bonsai*

I was 15 years old when I saw her for the first time. I was coming back from an international exchange. Together with my parents, I discovered a new world full of miniature nature. I am from Colombia and come from Cali, a medium-sized city between the Farallones and the mountains in a place full of history and bonsai. Around 1993 I had the opportunity to participate in an international Bonsai event in Orlando USA where I met Solita, the lady of Bonsai. A woman with great sensibility and a huge amount of energy. In my city, I have heard of her as she was by then the emeritus president of many bonsai organizations. She fomented bonsai globally, and since she was from Colombia, it was an honor to our country. Later, I was accepted as a student by her husband, Chase Rosade, a man full of integrity and wisdom with a deep love for Soli. Thanks to this connection, I was able to experience many moments and situations that will live with me forever. There were so many countries and cities, so many exhibitions and teachings that it will be impossible to forget you. In the world of bonsai, your memory will last, and we will miss you.

### **From Nelson Hernandez, Puerto Rico**

#### *Like the Sun from Colombia*

Soli, my great friend, your name in Spanish is like the sun from Colombia. You gave so much to the world of bonsai and went further than any of us. You opened a channel to open doors for the talented, and you gave us the love and friendship in this art. You will always be present as you have become part of my history. Your friend, Nelson.

Nelson Hernandez has practiced Bonsai since 1989, known in Puerto Rico as the winner of two BCI awards and his Neea was selected as the third prize in the WBFF

**Following are works of bonsai art from Latin America, a legacy of leadership and influence from pioneers like Solita Tafur Rosade.**

**“Solita was our guide. She organized us and taught the world of bonsai, she defended it as places and opportunities for the new and old artists. She was always attentive, gentle, and generous.”**  
**Sergio Luciani**





Top left: Sergio Luciani, *Pinus halepensis*

Top right: Hebert Puntual, *Calliandra spinosa*

Bottom left: Enrique Castaño, *Bucida spinosa*

Bottom right: Sergivaldo Costa, *Calliandra spinosa*





Top left: Felipe Gonzalez, *Juniperus depeanna*  
Top right: Enrique Castaño, *Conocarpus erectus*  
Bottom left: Nelson Hernandez, *Neea buxifolia*  
Bottom right: Felipe Gonzalez, *Juniperus depeanna*







Sergivaldo Costa, *Calliandra spinosa*



Pedro Morales, *Neea buxifolia*

Enrique Castaño, *Bucida spinosa*



Felipe Gonzalez, *Juniperus squamata*







Top left: Nacho Marin, *Pithecellobium unguis*

Top right: Cristian De Ross, *Calliandra brevipes*

Middle left: Sergio Luciani, *Eugenia uniflora*

Middle right: José E. Rodriguez, *Conocarpus erectus*

Bottom right: Sergio Luciani, *Pinus halepensis*





Top left: Renato Bocabelo, *Pinus resinosa*



Top right: Nacho Marin, *Pithecellobium dumosum*



Middle right: Itamar Nobre, *Calliandra spinosa*

Bottom left: Nacho Marin, *Pithecellobium dumosum*

Bottom right: Sergivaldo Costa, *Calliandra spinosa*







Top left: Felipe Gonzalez, *Juniperus depeanna*  
Top right: Enrique Castaño, *Haematoxylum campechianum*  
Middle left: Paulo Henrique Gomes, *Calliandra spinosa*  
Bottom left: José E. Rodriguez, *Conocarpus erectus*  
Bottom right: Pedro Morales, *Ixora coccinea*







# At the Whim of Time and Weather

*Juniperus sabina*  
'L'Arcigno'

By Bruno Proietti Tocca, Italy

Above is a monumental exemplar of a Savin juniper on El Hierro, Canary Islands (photo by Vin Crosbie, CT, USA).

**T**he Savin Juniper, *Juniperus sabina*—part of the Cupressaceae or cypress family—is a shrub very variable in its shapes, with very fine branching. The color of its bark is reddish-brown, and its foliage has a characteristic strong smell. Its strong roots can grow amongst rock and stones. It is possible to find this shrub in sunny slopes, sparse forest with rocky areas, cliffs, and detritus.

The Savin Juniper is a juniper species that is continuously remade and remodeled by time. Above is a monumental exemplar on El Hierro, Canary Islands (photo by Vin Crosbie, CT, USA).

The Savin Juniper is native to the mountains of central and southern Europe and central and west Asia, from Spain to eastern Siberia. It grows typically at altitudes of 1,000–3,300 m ASL (above sea level). For a few months during winter, the snow presses the shrub to the ground, breaking its branches and its bark. In the years to come, subsequent growths will undergo the same treatment as they try to rise up in search of light. However, this

is not the only disturbance suffered by this species. The rolling of big stones and the power of the wind are other natural factors that create extreme conditions and eccentric shapes. Its pliable characteristic and its abundant availability in nature classify the Savin Juniper as a plant very suitable for creating bonsai. When exhibited in a tokonoma, they offer the best aspect. Over the years, we have seen beautiful specimens of this plant in European exhibitions. The Rastrera variety has allowed Spanish people who grow and make bonsai, among others, to excel in premier competitions.

Then, let's introduce our subject plant and tell its story.

## Work on the Plant

The design of this plant is influenced by the way I feel about and interpret bonsai. I was awarded a Diploma at the Creative Bonsai School of Sandro Segneri. Through Sandro's eclectic vision, I have acquired a taste for non-conventional bonsai. Therefore, when a friend proposed I purchase this plant, I was smitten.





*Top:* The plant after the restoration of the deadwood and selection of the living part.

*Bottom:* Drawing the design of the future plant is like imagining our bonsai after ten, twenty, thirty years of growing in pot.

First of all, I am going to describe the specimen at the time of the purchase. In 2010, when the plant arrived in my garden, it had a medium size dimension. The specimen had already received an intervention of wiring on the main branches. After this complex treatment, the foliage did not appear pleasant, and due to the stress it suffered, its mature scale-like foliage reverted to juvenile needles.

### Practical approach, growing

The first approach with this unusual specimen has been to promote growth to restore the mature scale-like foliage. In 2011, I moved the tree into a growing bonsai pot, with a mixture of 60% Pumice, 30% Akadama, 10% Kiryu, with a particle size from 2 to 5 mm. Through organic fertilization of N7-P6-K1 in Spring and N3-P6-K7 in Autumn, and additional weekly use of humic acid, have helped the plant to recover its vibrant color.

### Design

The bonsai setting should take into account all its elements which are: nebari, trunk, branches, foliage, lines of power, veins, deadwood, and so on. Still, the most essential thing is to follow the plant, understand its temperament, feel its beauty. It is unique and original, without necessarily following the standard aesthetic guidelines. It is essential to magnify the parts of significant interest and hide the parts that make the vision of the plant monotonous and static. Dynamism is a value in bonsai that should be taken into account, always. The vision of a small tree in a pot should evoke an emotion of beauty, naturalness, vitality, and conclude in amazement. Often, a tree that we perceive as static does not make us feel all these emotions.







By capturing our feelings, we can perceive fine balances that comprise the original composition (plant, container, full and empty parts, shape...), without exceeding the representation of nature itself. We can characterize the plant with our personal point of view. The overall vision is the result of our own sensitivity, artistic/cultural, and emotional. The ability of interpreting may vary from subject to subject, with redefining in this way the birth of new shapes. By moving the attention to feelings, it is possible to catch the simplicity of nature, the harmony of normality, the non-excessive and non-exuberant, like the passing of time that expresses itself on the patina of the deadwood of an old trunk.

### Drawing

Drawing the design of the future plant, by using creativity and technical knowledge, will help to make stylistic choices and facilitate the insights that will make the plant original. This is like imagining our bonsai after ten, twenty, thirty years of growing in a pot.

### Season after season

A deciduous tree changes color with the seasons, the foliage becomes sparse, leaves drop. Evergreens and conifers also change with the seasons but face these cycles with pride and perseverance. Capturing the aspects of change throughout the seasons is another element that should inspire when forming the new shape. Colors and contrast are elements to evaluate with attention, to impress that sense of naturalness that every bonsai should have.

The main characteristic of this plant is the abundance of deadwood and the presence of infinite jin over the whole structure. This beauty derives from the many difficulties that the plant has suffered before being harvested. From landslides, from months under heavy snow and from being foraged by deer. Hooks, mustaches, and figure-eight shapes have, together, inspired the name of the specimen, 'L'Arcigno'. In Italian, this name evokes the mustache-twirling villain in comic books.

It has been fascinating to discover how, layer by layer, beauty, and balance of proportion between deadwood and living vein come out. Under the attacks of bad weather, part of the wood was dried and rotten. Due to its complexity, the deadwood has been reclaimed by the use of gouges, gas burners, and a variety of tools. A mixture of jin liquid with a small percentage of black paint has given a touch of naturalness and aging to the whole picture.

### Depth

The appealing aspects of a tree that gives me inspiration are many. Especially when the structure of the deadwood is interpreted as a dynamic element and not just a simple lifeless mass of wood. Wood, like foliage and empty parts, is an essential part of bonsai beauty. On cliffs and mountains, natural elements create shapes that inspire human beings.

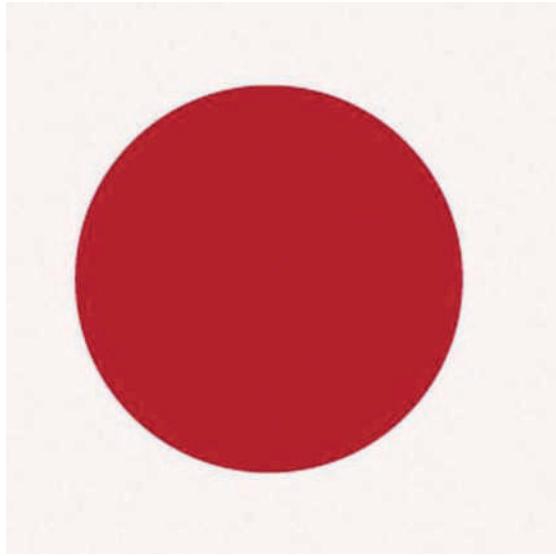
Then, how do we realize and sculpt a bonsai? By observing the world around us! Big pine trees receive broken



The main characteristic of this plant is the abundance of deadwood and the presence of infinite jin over the whole structure. Hooks, mustaches and figure-eight shapes have, together, inspired the name of the specimen, 'L'Arcigno'.







*Top left and right:* Because of the white background, the red circle appears more visible in an environment as the encircling white color isolates it. After, I linked the concept of a red disk on white background with the circle created by the branch, I asked myself: can an inserted circle in a composition become attractive to an observer?

branches from the weight of the snow; creeping juniper trees weave into each other, like a vital hug seeking protection from ice and landslides. Then, how about considering big trees stooped by wind, eroded by sand, burned by fire. The world is full of these examples from which we can get inspiration. When a branch detaches from the trunk, it tears off a portion of wood, dragging all the underlying fibers with it, injuring and separating bands of bark. Old wounds on the trunk are attacked by bacteria, fungi, and animals, thus creating large openings.

Considering the deadwood part of this bonsai (see photos top left and right), I have been smitten by the circle shape of the branch near the apex. I contemplated the form, trying to consider its attraction. Then, I remembered learning some drawing theory about a red circle on a white background. Because of the white background, the red circle appears more visible in an environment as the encircling white color isolates it. After I linked the concept of a red disk on a white background with the circle created by the branch, I asked myself: can an inserted circle in a composition become attractive to an observer? Maybe it will. Let's try to understand why.

A disk shape attracts and holds our attention. We have the tendency to pay poor attention when we observe angles. For example, when seeing a triangle, our focus will change direction three times. When observing a square, four times, and so on. Instead, a circle does not have angles, so our attention will remain concentrated on its shape until it becomes tiring. The perfection of circular shapes captures the attention, such as the circle shape of animals' pupils, that makes their eyes a fantastic vision of nature. What I am trying to do is to find inspiration from theoretical studies and apply them when I make bonsai. Everything of interest, such as memory, old studies, pictures of nature, art, and so on, is an excellent way to guide our creativity when either styling or carving a plant. Here, bonsai art is thought of as a way to stimulate our studies and not only as a technique, which is indispensable, but limitless and repeatable forever! Like our circle.



These five images on this and the following page show a technique for extreme bends. The branch is hollowed out somewhat, a spline is embedded in the hollow, then the branch is wrapped with raffia. After, it is wrapped in a plastic tape to further protect the bark.



### Technique

From the technical aspect, it has not been easy to make an intervention on the plant. The biggest concern when working with this kind of old material is actually the fragility of wood. I have paid particular attention to a branch, where I have applied the use of a technique for an extreme bend.

By using a bamboo cane fixed between the ground and the trunk, it was possible to use it as a tie-beam that maintained the branch in the back in contraction. In the picture, it is possible to see how the structure has been realized to create a certain harmony amongst the groups of foliage. Tie-beam and copper guy wires have





**Spring 2013, First styling**

*Bottom right:* By the use of a bamboo cane fixed between the ground and the trunk, it was possible to use it as a tie-beam that maintained branch on the back in contraction.

been used with the same concept of ‘puppet’ wires to offer adequate support in styling the shape. For the next interventions, the use of copper wire will be minimal. That is the secret of a good styling process. The diameter of a copper wire depends on the strength of the wool fibers, variable from species to species. Unsuitable thicknesses will lead to some unforeseen results. For example, large diameters on thin bark create unsightly scars and damage the cambium. Copper wire too weak will not be able to maintain the position of the branch during styling. Also, it may be risky, especially for sharp bending, causing the branch to break. The bend should be done where there is at least one spiral or more of wire on the outside of the curve.

**Considerations**

Being a precious specimen, in my opinion, in terms of uniqueness and singularity, I immediately placed this specimen within the aesthetic synthesis of the “modern.”

In the study of nature, the Japanese have interpreted trees by defining their styles. We could refer to these pre-





established rules, or let ourselves go to new inspirations and to enrich the art of bonsai with specimens with original shapes. In this, however, be careful. It is easy to fall into the trap of trivia, of “it is enough that it is different.” For it to be innovative and beautiful, the avant-garde starts from classic assumptions and exploits every principle.

After the first styling, the plant has been re-potted in this definitive position. The change of topsoil and one year of rest have favored the growth of the foliage.

### Considerations about the Modern bonsai vision

*It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.*  
—Pablo Picasso

For the Japanese tradition, you achieve expertise through practice, a constant and motivated commitment. Only in this way can you go beyond the gesture, freeing it from forced solutions.

With the bonsai that has arrived in the West just a short time ago, is it a question of “forcing” the hand? Thoroughly knowing Japanese culture becomes an indispensable tool.

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an art revolution occurred in Europe. The images of paintings, which until then have been represented with a straightforward realism, begin to break up. To manifest themselves in a new way. Through Art Nouveau, Dada,



Futurism, Cubism, Surrealism, Impressionism, and all the other isms, images appear that no longer belong to material reality. Is it a dream? Man is no longer bound to residual images of reality. A new period for art is just around the corner, we start experiencing change, a part of us that we did not yet know, beyond reason.

More than half a century later in Japan, in Masahiko Kimura’s bonsai, I find such a revolutionary event. With him, we can trace a moment of transition towards a new

#### Autumn 2014

Before/After pruning and thinning, and the finishing touches on the deadwood.



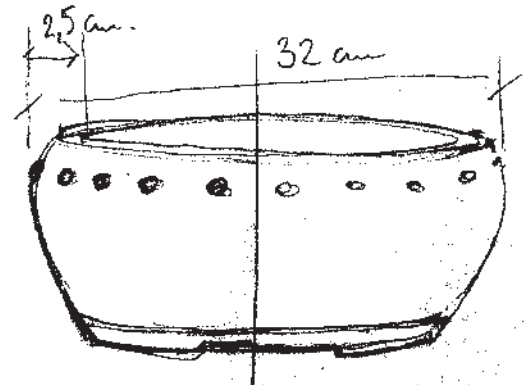


vision of bonsai. However, a change that comes from a reality firmly rooted in traditional culture is confirmed by his studies and approach. His training was impressed on him by the teachings of masters of traditional culture.

Today, we Western bonsaists seek our “way,” we start by studying and referring to a millenary culture, the Japanese one. We do it for bonsai, but the same is also valid for other disciplines or arts such as *ikebana*, *shodo*, tea ceremony, and so on. Will we be able to absorb a new culture like the Japanese one and be able to integrate it with ours? I believe so, in our history, we have seen significant changes, moments in which reason has been put aside for a new reality and a renewed identity.

### Future Container Project

When choosing the container, it is essential to evaluate the overall appearance of the plant and the pot. For this tree, I will choose a round drum pot to harmonize with the curvilinear shapes of the trunk and deadwood.



**About the Author:** Bruno Proietti Tocca is a BCI and IBS instructor. He developed an interest in bonsai in the early '90s. His first major debut was at the BCI IBS congress in Saint Vincent in 2008. Winner of numerous bonsai awards and author of articles for bonsai magazines, he founded the SHIZEN bonsai school in Rome in 2016, allowing him to use his knowledge and spread the culture of bonsai. He is now an instructor for various courses across the country, including amateur clubs and associations. Visit [www.bonsai-bci.com](http://www.bonsai-bci.com) and see his other works in his BCI Instructor profile.

### Autumn 2014, 2nd styling.

*Top left:* Bartolomeo helps me with the refinement of the branches.

*Bottom:* L'Arcino at Night.

Every specimen has its own way of developing and this generate a series of unique and singular characteristics.









# Visiting a Grand Master of Bonsai in Taiwan

## Lee, Chong Hong

By Budi Sulisty, Indonesia

Contributing author: José Luis Rodríguez Macias

Mr. Lee in his studio with a literati juniper and a photo of the tree featured by ASPAC.

**C**hinese New Year this year was on January 25. By tradition, the New Year is celebrated over 15 days. On February 5, Mr. Ho Xi Xiong, Mr. Huang Ching Fu, Mr. Ho Jan Lee, Mr. Jacky Shieh, Mr. Paul Lin, my wife Treis and I, went to pay a visit to Master Lee Chong Hong's house in Tai Chung, Taiwan to wish him a happy new year. Mr. Lee will be a headliner at "Ultimate On Fire," the BCI Regional Convention on August 8 to 10, 2020, in Indonesia.

He and his wife accepted us in his tidy room that featured a traditional big Chinese table, complete with the tea ceremony equipment to serve his guests. He was dressed in a semi-formal western way, a bit

different from other Chinese friends who we have visited. A lovely bonsai picture hung on the wall, and a tall literati juniper was set next to his chair. These gave a pleasant atmosphere to the room, a bit formal but artistic. As usual, excellent Chinese tea with some fruits and crackers was offered to all of us.

I have heard the name of Master Lee for a long time already. I saw his demonstration for the first time when I was in the Philippines during one bonsai Convention. At that time, he styled an old Maba buxifolia into a bonsai. I was impressed by his way of demonstrating. First, he drew the future of the bonsai he intended to make. And then he started to do the job. At that time, I got the impression that he was a really interesting





bonsai master. I heard that, in fact, it was Master Lee who contributed the most to the growth of bonsai in the Philippines.

Master Lee, who was born in Nantou, Taiwan, in 1954, is a senior bonsai master in Taiwan. He is one of the originators of SiDiao or the Silk Fiber Carving method, a method used to create exquisite yamadori-style junipers

from field-grown stock. SiDiao or Silk Fiber carving involves the manual carving of juniper or pine wood, pulling the individual fibers of the dead portions to reveal the natural grain, obtaining similar results to the decay and degradation of exposed wood that has been subjected to the elements of nature. Wood strands are individually pulled with the aid of chisels and pliers to

Three more views of Mr. Lee's favorite tree, the juniper used as the ASPAC logo .

A formal photo, *top*, the juniper in the garden, *left*, and the juniper surrounded by visiting guests, *right*.





*Dendrobium umbellatum* in leaf



*Maba buxifolia*



*Dendrobium umbellatum* defoliated



*Murraya*



*Ficus*



*Juniperus*



**Mr. Lee is one of the originators of SiDiao or the Silk Fiber Carving method, a method used to create exquisite yamadori-style junipers from field-grown stock.**



*Juniperus*



*Juniperus*





*Juniper in process. See drawing on the right.*



*Juniperus*

Mr. Lee's drawing ability is a great asset that helps him visualize the future of his bonsai in process.



*Juniperus*



achieve a natural finish. In a sense, the artist removes the impurities, just like a skilled jade- or diamond-cutter would expose the beauty within the raw gemstones.

An expert on many species, including Ficus, Pemphis acidula, Ulmus, and Juniperus, his creations have won the Grand Prize award in TBCA (Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association) and Hwa Fong Exhibitions several times.

He has been invited to teach, evaluate, and demonstrate the skill of bonsai in Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, China, Vietnam, and other countries. He also got several appointments as a technical consultant to the National Association of Chinese Potted Art and a current member of the evaluation committee of the China National Association of Bonsai Art Street. In 2005, he was hired by the China Bonsai Artists Association as a master of Chinese bonsai art. In 2019 he was appointed as the Technical Adviser of Vietnam Potting Association.

In 2019, during the ASPAC (Asia-Pacific) Convention in Vietnam, he was one of the headliners. He demonstrated on a big juniper by creating a lot of jin and shari on the tree. I also did my demonstration at the next table so that I had a chance to see what he was doing. After Vietnam, both of us went to the Philippines for a convention. I could see once more how good Mr. Lee did his demonstration. Later, I asked Mr. Lee to be our headliner in the BCI Regional Convention. I was delighted and grateful when he said yes.

After drinking, eating, and having some conversations, we went outside to see the many trees in his garden. I noticed that there was a tree that



looked familiar to me. It was a big juniper with jin and shari. Knowing that I paid attention to that tree, Mr. Lee mentioned that it was the tree used as the symbol of ASPAC in Vietnam that was held last November and featured in promotions for the BCI Convention 2017, Taiwan. It was just several months ago, that was the reason why the picture was fresh in my mind. Later on, I noticed that the bonsai picture in the room was, in fact, the ASPAC Vietnam symbol that he was very proud of.

It was so amazing to see his garden and his collections. There were many trees arranged in the garden, like Juniper, Hibiscus, Ficus, Podocarpus, Muraya, Maba buxifolia, and many others. There was a hand-painted picture of a beautiful Juniper bonsai. Mr. Lee mentioned that it was his future bonsai vision of one of the trees that at that time was still in process.

In fact, it has been a long time I admire the expertise of Mr. Lee in doing bonsai. He is well respected by many bonsai lovers around the world. But, not even once has he come to Indonesia to show and share his ability in doing bonsai. Please join our “Ultimate On Fire” BCI Regional Convention on August 8 to 10, 2020, in Tangerang, Indonesia, to see Master Lee in action. 🌲



*Podocarpus*



*Juniperus*

**Please join our “Ultimate On Fire” BCI Regional Convention on August 8 to 10, 2020, in Tangerang, Indonesia, to see Master Lee in action.**





Massimo Bandera,  
left, Raúl Alcalá  
Bermúdez, right.

# El Jentilak del Nord

## A Yew From Northern Spain

By Massimo Bandera, Italy, and Raúl Alcalá Bermúdez, Spain

**T**he story of this Yew, whose age is estimated at 350 years, begins in early 2012. I had seen an article by Masahiko Kimura that I found in a marketplace on the Internet and tried to reflect his work in a yew tree. The starting material was a tree collected from the northern part of Spain, the Basque Country. It was one of a series of articles written for a Spanish magazine.





**1-3:** The tree was cylindrical with some undefined details in deadwood, which were worked with power tools such as Makita™ and Dremel.™

I had previously done a preliminary job on styling, but it was very rough. It lacked branching. The live portion was in the lower area of the tree and was poorly distributed.

**4-5:** At the end of 2012, I began a bonsai workshop training with Massimo Bandera. The wood was worked, and the little green that was there was wired, thus giving it some structure.

**6-9:** It was cultivated in *akadama* (red ball earth) and heavily fertilized for a workshop that took place in February 2017 with the teacher Ryan Neil.

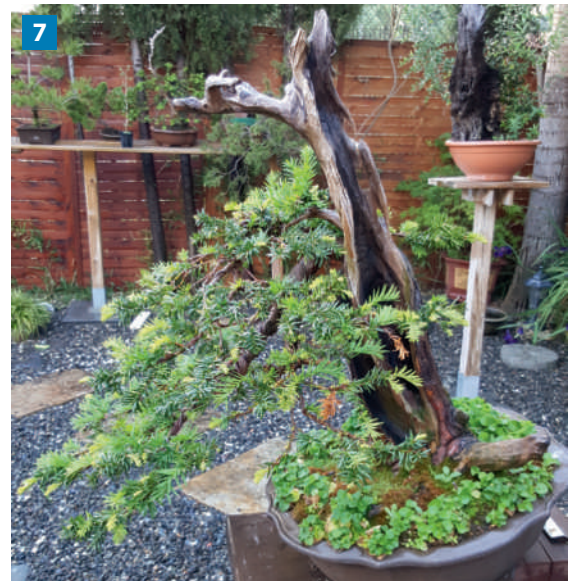
**10-12** The design was established for the tree, providing it with a distribution of branches to achieve a defined crown. The deadwood was not worked in that workshop.

**13-14:** In 2017, the tree was exhibited at II FKB Espana City of Ubeda Exhibition of 2017, in Spain.

**15-17:** At the end of 2018, pruning and woodwork were carried out by my teacher Massimo Bandera. The wood was worked with a chainsaw, giving it another change of front.

As you can see in the first two photos at the beginning this article, in 2020 it underwent a transplant to discover the hidden *nebari* (root-flare), also to tilt the tree and leave it in its final position. Thus we went from having a basic material, dull and without movement, to now having a tree with many years of cultivation. It's complexity implies old age due to its excellent *ten-jin* (bare-stripped part of a branch when it is the apex) and its deadwood and evokes mystery in its great *saba* (hollowed trunk) and elegance in its pot. It expresses the beauty of the imperfect, of the unfinished and the simple.





## Aesthetic Analysis

In an aesthetic analysis, we can say that when we see this Yew, it moves us. This is a tree with a great *fukinsei* (asymmetry) with that great *ten-shari* (the apical hollow trunk) that is like a finger that points to the sky and the flowerpot with the curves and cloud legs.

The *kanso koko* (simplicity) is found in the bark of the tree with those soft brown tones; the *wabi sabi* (austerity) in the white *ten-shari*; the *shizen* (nature) in the crown of the tree that is proportional to the trunk giving a very natural aspect to the whole of the tree. The *yuugen* (mystery) in the *ten-shari* makes one ponder how that could happen. The tree's age reflects everything that it has experienced: its dead part and its living part, the seeming *datsuzoku* (freedom of action) made with the tool that will take some time to be naturalized within the harmony of the tree. The *seijaku* (tranquility), the ratio between the trunk and the green tree gives a feeling of peace and reflection.

In short: the tree transmits a perfect set: crown, trunk and pot. 🌲











# Visiting Suanphung Bonsai Village

By Budi Sulisty, Indonesia

Last year I made a plan to have a family holiday in Bangkok Thailand during the Christmas and New Year holidays. A total of me, my wife, two daughters, two sons in law, and two grandchildren would stay for eight days. At that time, I recalled the invitation of Mr. Montri Suksermsongchai, the Past President of Thai Bonsai Society and the most prominent bonsai man in Thailand, to visit his bonsai garden located outside of Bangkok. Montri has been my good friend for almost 20 years; we have attended some bonsai conventions together. We used to exchange bonsai. Some bonsai in my garden are from him. I thought that it would be an excellent opportunity to combine my vacation with a bonsai visit. I decided to go on December 24 with my wife two days before the

arrival of the rest of the family to go to his garden. By starting my bonsai trip before the family reunion, I would be able to concentrate and enjoy the bonsai, the garden, and our friendships more. At the same time, it would not interfere with the joy of the whole group who possibly did not have as much interest in bonsai as me.

Early on the 25th, after getting breakfast, Montri came to the hotel and took us to his house to see his bonsai collection. Montri is the biggest bonsai collector in Thailand. Many of his bonsai received awards in the competition. His ability to speak English makes him the most prominent bonsai man from Thailand in the international bonsai communities. Thailand once got a visit from Mr. John Yoshio Naka, the grandmaster of bonsai, in the early nineteen eighties. The teaching of Naka-san





Top: The entrance to Suanphung Bonsai Village.

Top inset: My wife Treis with a big Imperial-size *Ficus virens*.

Bottom left: Our host Mr. Montri Suksermsongchai (far right) with my wife and me and with another Imperial-size bonsai.

Bottom right: *Ficus benjamina*, root over rock.





is well applied in most bonsai in Thailand. They have beautiful nebari, strong trunks, and nice distribution of the branches and twigs with good ramification. We spent some time in his garden, enjoying his beautiful bonsai, and then started our journey to the resort.

It took about three hours by car, including one stop for lunch on the way to reach the bonsai garden located in Ratchaburi province. Before entering the garden, there is a sign on the side of the street pointing the way to it. Upon entering the garden, there is a beautiful small garden arrangement with nice decoration, a small pagoda for flower offering, and the sign of Suanphung Bonsai Village as the gate to the garden. It is a large garden of around 40 hectares of land surrounded by plantations and forests. As the garden is quite large and we were a bit tired already, Mr. Montri asked us to tour around with a garden mini-car. I could not believe my eyes to see so many beautiful bonsai, some were quite big, nicely put on big black stones or on stone stands in the garden. There were many beautiful trees as some of the bonsai have received awards in the exhibitions. The numbers were really unbelievable. It was said that they are over 2000 bonsai. It must have been a hell of a lot of money spent to create the garden!

We then spent the night in a nice small hotel inside Suanphung Bonsai Village. The name of the district is Suanphung, which locally means “the bee garden.” Previously it was a forest with many bees in it. Montri bought the land bit by bit over the last 20 years and has built his dream to make a beautiful bonsai garden in that place. He also included some facilities like a hotel, restaurant, bungalows, ponds, and some parks. That

*Top left: A thick benjamina.*

*Middle: A podocarpus.*

*Bottom: The main lodge*

*Facing page: Views of the Suanphung Bonsai Village Gardens*





is why Montri names his garden Suanphung Bonsai Village. It will not be only a garden, but more suitably called a village. When we went out by car to get our dinner in a good nearby restaurant, I realized that it was located in a small tourist area with more facilities.

Early in the morning, together with my wife, we went around by ourselves to enjoy the fresh air. There was a lower landscape behind the hotel with a long road on the side of a river about 15 meters wide. The clear water runs along the river with some stones here and there. There is a forest on the right side of the river, giving a feeling of privacy to the garden. There are some bonsai displayed on concrete piles along the left side of the road providing the opportunity for people to enjoy one by one the beauty of the bonsai. The weather was cool, and the air was very fresh, in turn making us feel equally good and fresh. It was so much different from the atmosphere of the city.







Top: Arched bridge in the Japanese Garden.

Middle: The on-going and continual work of taking care of the many plants in the Village.

Lower middle: *Ficus microcarpa*



While looking at the trees, I saw some people taking care of the bonsai. Bonsai is a living art that continues growing. They need not only watering but also maintenance. Some of the tropical trees grow quite quickly. It is not an easy job to keep 2000 beautiful trees in their optimal shape all the time. The watering, including liquid fertilizer, can be done by an automatic system, but repotting, trimming, and wiring, if necessary, should be done by people who know bonsai.

In the upper area of the garden, I saw better bonsai displayed with a long fence as the background to the plants that indirectly function as the backdrop of the bonsai display. It gave us a better opportunity to take good pictures. There were many kinds of species, like several kinds of *Vicus*, *Podocarpus*, *Feronia*, *Murraya*, *Eugenia*, and many more. Many of them were quite big—some over 3 meters tall. There was a big pond with a nice two-story house on the other side of the pond, a red bridge crossing the narrow part of the pond, a gazebo, a round door that went to the Chinese garden, and a Japanese gate going to the Japanese garden. The garden was not yet fully finished. Anyhow, I could imagine that it would be one of the best Bonsai Villages in the world.

We felt very lucky to have such an opportunity to visit the village. We should have spent one more night to enjoy the detail of the bonsai. There were too many to enjoy. Thank you very much, Mr. Montri, for taking us to your dream village. Thanks to Suanphung Bonsai Village, our visit to Thailand became complete and meaningful. 🌳








Five photos showing just a hand-full of the more than 2,000 bonsai trees in the Village.

*Bottom:* the formal entrance to the Chinese Garden







# THE LORE AND LURE OF BONSAI SOIL

By Rajeev Vaidya, India  
Photos by Rajeev Vaidya

Above photo illustration created from a photo of a Juniper re-potting at Museo Tatsugoro, Mexico.

## PROLOGUE

Generally, in our south Asian tropical regions, a standard bonsai soil composition includes manure and humus (if available), firstly, due to its easy availability and comparatively low cost and secondly, and equally, because they have the added ability of good moisture retention. Moisture retention is so necessary for our high-temperature climatic conditions, and this seems to have worked fine so far. Recently, a casual comment by an eminent horticulturist friend against the use of manure or compost in potting mixes started me thinking that shifting from this tried-and-tested manure-rich soil to a manure-less one would be imprudent without thoroughly considering the implications of such a move. I thought more research into global bonsai soil practices was needed if I was to understand the difference better and decide one way or the other, at least for myself. However, when I delved deeper, I realized how complex it was and how delicate the balance was between using the different compositions of bonsai soil. There are vast differences in soil types, their usage in different climatic conditions, and their co-relation with the different varieties of plants across the globe.

So here goes ...

## BONSAI SOIL: THE WHY AND HOW

It was imperative first to understand:

- 1) what a bonsai soil is;
- 2) whether the lack any kind of manure in bonsai soil in our hot weather was workable for bonsai in the long run (mainly because bonsai are generally grown in considerably shallow pots);
- 3) whether there is comparability in the composition of bonsai soil per se in similar climatic regions and whether these regions also favor a manure-less bonsai soil composition;
- 4) study the soil practices of bonsai growers in temperate areas of the world;
- 5) the reasons for the different soil practices in the tropical versus temperate regions, and

6) whether a dependable common denominator could be suggested for ingredients in the composition of bonsai soil.

## The definition and importance of bonsai soil and its bases

It is an incontrovertible fact that soil is the single-most crucial factor in the successful cultivation of bonsai other than the basic requirements of water and sunlight. The composition of a foolproof, perfect formula of bonsai soil has preoccupied the attention of bonsai practitioners of the world, leading to just as many claims of excellent recipes for bonsai soil. And although the experts may not agree upon a common recipe, generally all are agreed that a good bonsai soil



should essentially represent a composite media (of organic or/and inorganic matter). Firstly with excellent drainage capacity, proper aeration through functional particle integrity (or what I will call soil breathability) in which the plant roots can grow reasonably well, obtain good anchorage, good CEC (Cation Exchange Capacity), neutral or species-wise Ph factor, neutral chemical reactivity, provide initial nutrition for proper growth and also excellent humidity retention in tropical climatic conditions. (For details, please see my article “Bonsai Soil – The Key to Successful and Healthy Bonsai Growing” on my website [www.ruchabonsai.com](http://www.ruchabonsai.com)).

Considering this as a working hypothesis, a bonsai soil composition, although it may vary from place to place, region to region and person to person may be classified into the following bases:

**Pure garden earth:** Ordinary or everyday garden earth used without any additives except perhaps manure or compost (organic ingredient).

- Pure soil or garden earth is the most natural growing medium for plants. It usually contains natural minerals, the nutritive value of which depends upon the geographical location or source from which it is obtained. It usually has fine-sized particles which are a sure shot invitation to early soil compaction, loss of soil aeration (i.e., anaerobic respiration or lack of oxygen or gaseous exchange) and production of ethanol (toxic alcohol). Fine-sized particles can lead to clogging of drainage holes hampering the production and growth of roots. Also, skipping watering for some reason for even a couple of days may cause the soil to solidify (does not allow permeation of water) and the roots trapped inside this solid mass of may dehydrate, causing the death of the plant.
- Plant varieties native to a particular geographical region seem to thrive when they are grown as bonsai in the same soil.
- CEC is bettered by the use of organic ingredients.

**A mix of manure (or similar organic ingredients), garden earth and elements with good tensile strength:**

- Manure usually has very fine or small-sized particles which tend to break down further and compact quite soon after potting/repotting and clog the drainage holes. The inclusion of at least 33% of ingredients with excellent tensile strength allows better drainage than the garden earth plus compost mix.
- If this combination contains a lesser amount of tensile components, apart from compaction, it may retain too much moisture during winter and/or monsoon seasons due to reduced evaporation in the reduced daylight hours in winter or its complete absence in monsoons. On the other hand, during summer days, dry pockets of manure may form, leading to dehydration/desiccation of trapped hair roots. However, the addition of ingredients having a good tensile strength in a proportion higher or at least equal in volume to the other two components can ensure better

**Sample photos of some of the elements used in bonsai soil.**

**They vary in drainage capacity, aeration through functional particle integrity in which the plant roots can grow reasonably well and obtain good anchorage, CEC (Cation Exchange Capacity), neutral or species-wise Ph factor, neutral chemical reactivity, nutrition for proper growth and also humidity retention in tropical climatic conditions.**



Akadama from Japan



Brick crush from India



Coco peat



Compost, manure



Crushed Anthracite coal

drainage and also mitigate the problems of lessened evaporation.

- Watering, however, needs to be done carefully in both summer and winter if using a lesser proportion of tensile strength ingredients. Root growth usually suffers if attention is not paid to watering.



## What is CEC?

CEC is the soil's inherent ability to store positively charged ions of plant nutrients. Some soil ingredients have negatively charged ions (anions) on their surfaces, which adsorb and hold through electrostatic force positively charged exchangeable plant nutrients/minerals or cations such as calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, potassium, hydrogen, sodium, and ammonium, etc. The higher the negative charge in the soil particles, the greater is its CEC, allowing it to hold more nutrients and thus make the nutrients available to the plant for a longer time. CEC influences nutrient availability and maintains soil pH.

- CEC is generally good because of the inclusion of organic ingredients.

### A mix of organic matter and ingredients with good tensile strength but no soil or garden earth:

- The mix should ideally consist of organic matter mainly made up of shredded bark, peat moss, and additives like perlite, charcoal, etc. and an equivalent or higher proportion of tensile strength ingredients like stone crush (granite, scoria, pumice or zeolite). Soil or garden earth is not used at all.
- The use of bark and the other additives makes the soil less water retentive than if manure or compost are used. Also, the bark decomposes at a slower rate than manure and therefore does not compact or hamper drainage easily, and the use of a high proportion of tensile strength ingredients ensures further good drainage. Additives like perlite, charcoal, etc., also help to make the soil less prone to turn sour.
- Root growth is excellent due to good drainage and better soil aeration.
- CEC is mediocre. Fertilization is necessary every month.

### A mix containing shredded bark (mostly from a pine variety), peat moss and inorganic soil-less additives but without tensile ingredients:

- This kind of a mix also includes soil-less additives such as perlite, vermiculite, horticultural coal, etc., and is available commercially under various brand names. This mix will be just as water retentive as the familiar garden soil/compost mix but will be better draining because of the porosity of its ingredients.
- However, it will be slower draining than the mix containing ingredients of excellent tensile strength.
- Root growth is good due to good soil porosity. The mix can also be tailor-made to suit specific plant varieties.

- CEC is also good. Again, fertilization is necessary every month as it does not contain any nutritive value.

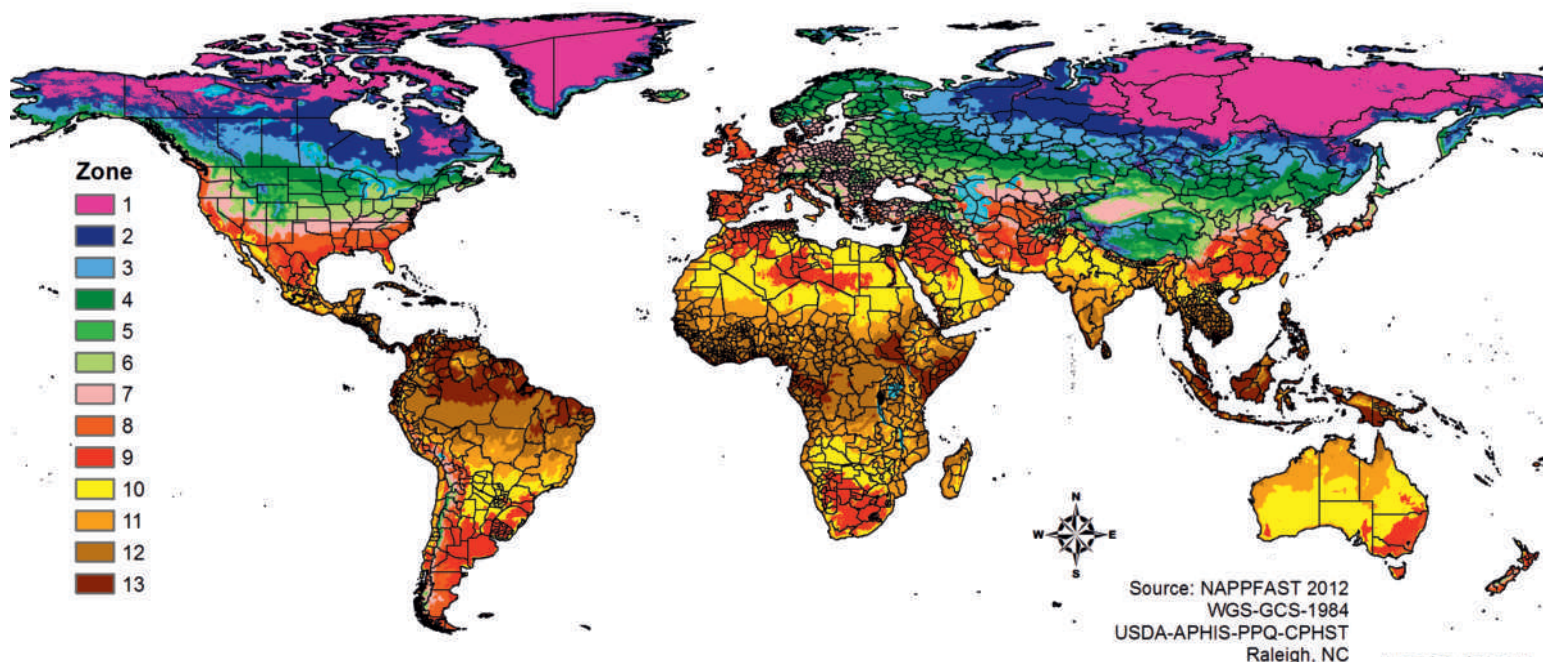
### Suitable tensile strength particles only (only soilless inorganic ingredients):

- This is a composition that contains only granular particles of good tensile strength, which remains well aerated and free-draining for a longer time, practically till the next repotting.
- Soil compaction through pulverization is negligible.
- Root growth is excellent.
- CEC is poor unless a right proportion of the tensile ingredients are permeable.
- The soil dries very fast, especially during the summer months.
- However, percolation of water tends to be almost exclusively vertical in the absence of substances, which would encourage horizontal capillary action. So if watering is not done carefully over the entire visible soil surface, some parts of the soil are likely to remain dry. If this often happens, roots in the un-moistened portion of the mix will either dry off or get cooked in scorching temperatures unless the situation is diagnosed and addressed immediately.
- Fertilization has to be very frequent.

## A comprehensive study of soil

To make a comprehensive study of soil and ingredients used for bonsai, I found it necessary to gather more information, therefore:

- I asked my bonsai friends and bonsai practitioners around the world, both domestic and foreign, to share their recipes of bonsai soil and the ingredients they favor;
- I consulted some authoritative books on bonsai by various authors from different countries;





- I looked up the researches done by some of the websites, clubs, bonsai practitioners and scientific researchers (I dare say there are many more researches, but I have referred to the ones that I have read or known about and which I thought would be representative of other such studies);
- I documented the ingredients in the compositions of bonsai soils used in similar climatic conditions.

The above considerations will enable us to understand the commonalities/differences between the different compositions of bonsai soils in the different regions of the world and help form a clearer picture of what should be a suitable growing medium in a particular growing condition.

### Soil and the different needs of plants in different climatic zones

Plants native to a particular region or climatic condition ranging from equatorial to polar or having the same cultural requirements do not need any special care when they are grown in a soil containing the native soil as the base ingredient.

Growing plant varieties brought from a particular region into another region with a different climatic condition requires extensive cultural study. It assumes greater importance in bonsai because of the use of much flatter pots, which have a slower rate of percolation of liquids as compared to vertical containers. Parallely, if plants imported from some other region and climate are to adapt, survive and thrive in a different region or climate setting, it is necessary to replicate their native growing conditions. To incorporate native soils or a soil combination with ingredients that come close to fulfilling the cultural needs of that plant variety/varieties, would seem necessary.

### In general, there are several regional and climatic differences affecting the choice of bonsai soil which are specified below:

**The tropical zone** located in the equatorial belt (between the Tropic of Cancer in the northern hemisphere and Tropic of Capricorn in the southern hemisphere) consists of the most torridly hot as well as the most humid climatic regions on the earth. Bonsai soil in these areas, therefore, needs to be able to retain sufficient moisture to withstand the persistently high temperatures but also requires a sufficiently high drainage capacity to counter heavy rain fall. The bonsai soil, therefore, consists of native earth, which contains humus having nutritive value, manure, coco-peat, vermiculite, etc., ensuring moisture retention and tensile ingredients provide good drainage.

The proportion of these separate ingredients depends upon the amount of rainfall (whether heavy, moderate or scanty), the quality of native or local garden earth or substrates and the moisture requirements of the plant species, etc.

On the other hand, due to the three growing seasons, plants in the tropical belt need year-round external fertilizers, even in monsoons (as they leech out very quickly). There is hardly any dormant season to speak



Diatomaceous earth



Expanded perlite



Foundry slag



Laterite stone crush



Lava rock crush from Indonesia



Leaf mould

of, although the growth of most of the plant varieties may slow down at the height of summer and winter; in these conditions, the organic content acts as a buffer of nourishment.

Absence of sunlight and lack of ingredients having good drainage capacity can result in root rot during



severe monsoons, especially with succulent varieties like jades and adeniums, etc.

These are matters which require considerable attention from individual bonsai growers if plants are to be grown successfully in these hot and humid climatic regions.

**In the semi-temperate regions** on the northern side of Tropic of Cancer and the southern side of Tropic of Capricorn respectively, climatic conditions are almost as hot as the tropical or equatorial belt but have more temperature fluctuations (perhaps because of the unequal slant of the sun rays). The plants are nearly the same as the equatorial tropical region. Some evergreen varieties, however, become facultative deciduous (meaning those which are evergreen in the rainforest regions become deciduous in the dry lowlands). As the climate is still hotter than semi-temperate regions, moisture retention is still an important requirement. Soil composition for bonsai in these regions is usually either a mixture of native soil, plus ingredients of tensile strength or organic matter (pine bark, peat moss, etc.), plus ingredients of tensile strength, the variation depending on their proximity or remoteness to the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn.

In the **sub-polar** regions (growing zones 3 and 2) nearer to the north and south poles with short summers and long winters, bonsai soil needs to be free draining with a predominance of highly tensile ingredients and practically no addition of organic matter.

The **temperate climate** regions that are in growing zones 4 to 8, can be found on most continents and are where bonsai growers create excellent bonsai. Compared to the sub-polar regions, winters are short and mild, summers are long and hot with ample rain. The ideal soil mix is Akadama, pumice, and lava rock. Akadama and pumice, along with Akadama substitutes like diatomaceous earth, chabusiai, and zeolite, all have good CEC. Proportions vary according to species, development stage, and the amount of rainfall in a particular region.

These soil-less growing media provide excellent drainage and oxygen to the roots. Fertilizers are administered externally when the plants are in a growth-positive stage. The plants growing in the soil-less medium in temperate climatic conditions will need winter care by way of careful watering and protection during the coldest days in winter, such as cold frames or a layer of mulch. Provided due care is taken, a soil-less bonsai growing medium appears to be very advantageous in temperate climatic conditions.

## **BONSAI SOIL PRACTICES IN THE DIFFERENT REGIONS OF THE WORLD**

The outcome of my discussions on soil aspects with many of my international bonsai friends including many of my fellow bonsai practitioners from India, information from several books by eminent bonsai practitioners and also collated data from different Internet blogs follows:

### **Synopsis of the soil substrates used in the composition of bonsai soil in the different regions and areas:**

**India** and the countries of **Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal** and **Sri Lanka** are geographically located in the tropical belt. They have a definite monsoon or rainy season. Local

substrates are used in bonsai soil as per their availability, but the overall compositions vary between different users. Some use the local soil neat (without additives), and others use it mixed with tensile, granular ingredients. Equally, given the local climatic conditions, extensive use of cheaply available manure as a primary ingredient is very much prevalent. Success rate appears to be higher when native or local plant varieties are grown in local substrates plus manure and granular components of good tensile strength, usually in equal parts by volume. However, some bonsai growers have switched over to soil-less compositions sans soil and manure, finding them less complicated.

In **South East Asia**, different regions use different soil formulas. Typical bonsai soil consists exclusively or extensively of lava (Indonesia, Philippines), local forest soil (Taiwan, Thailand), or tailor-made combinations of lava, burnt red soil, akadama, and mountain or river sand (in Malaysia). Many of the bonsai growers in these countries also use pumice and fly ash or similar aggregates extensively. Manure, along with native forest soil and sand is usually used only by growers of bonsai material. Native soil appears to have the ability to retain adequate moisture and does not pulverize easily. Many regions also have two monsoons per year.

Bonsai practitioners and growers in **Australia** like to use equal parts of an organic blend (composted bark and peat moss), scoria stone, pumice, unexpanded perlite, or granite but no garden earth. Some also prefer a good quality bark-based nursery mix. For coniferous varieties, more of scoria and horticultural charcoal is used. A standard combination of 40% stone crush, 40% bark, and 20% peat is used in places.

In **Japan**, where it all started, both Akadama, Kiryu, Kanuma, and Aoki in the granular form are used traditionally in bonsai soil ever since bonsai have been grown. Akadama (basically baked clay), is used for both coniferous and deciduous species. Kanuma, a form of volcanic pumice, is semi-absorbent and used primarily for azaleas and some similar species. Kiryu is another form of hard volcanic stone. So overall, in Japan, the species dictates whether Akadama, Kiryu, Aoki (a blend of Akadama, Fuji and Kiryu), or Kanuma is used. Akadama, Kanuma, and Aoki are now exported extensively to Europe and the USA.

Most **European** countries and the **USA** bonsai growers are inclined to import all the above Japanese soils perhaps because most early bonsai exponents were trained by Japanese masters and inherited their traditional soil practices. European and US bonsai growers also tend to additionally use chicken grit, gravel, river sand, decomposed granite, peat, and other semi-absorbent materials such as calcined clay (also called molars and sold under the brand names: Turface, Haydite, Biosorb, etc.), pumice, crushed lava, etc. Typical bonsai soil would consist of mixed proportions of all or any of the above ingredients but usually include a large quantity of Akadama either in raw or kiln-fired forms. Due to the colder temperatures and intermittent rains in these countries, moisture retention is not a concern, so manure, unless used for a specific purpose, usually does not figure as an ingredient in bonsai soil. Most bonsai growers also tend to tailor the proportions of the above ingredients to suit the requirements of different plant species.



**All books on bonsai by authors from temperate climates do not favor the use of compost in their bonsai soil mix.** Usually recommended is a high proportion of ingredients having good tensile strength, give less importance to CEC, and practically none for humus. All these authors who have a lot of experience in bonsai cultivation mainly in temperate climates favor the use of imported Akadama in neat form, as also Kiryu (Japanese influence again) and also use lava, pumice, calcined clay, grit, gravel, hard variety of granular diatomaceous earth, etc., depending on plant varieties (whether coniferous or deciduous) and in proportions which suit their local plant varieties.

**Several public websites and individual bonsai blogs also favor ingredients having good tensile strength and, again, practically no manure/humus.**

- Stones Lantern, USA, recommends a professional bonsai soil mix containing 1/3rd hard Akadama - 1/3rd Pumice - and 1/3rd Black Lava, with small amounts of Horticultural Charcoal in order to harbor beneficial bacteria, humic acid, and decomposed granite to add weight and structure.
- Dallas Bonsai from the US sells different potting soils, which include Akadama, Fujiyama Potting Medium, and Kanuma imported from Japan and additives or components such as calcined clay, grit, peat moss, pine bark, river sand, zeolite, etc.
- The website "Bonsai Empire" has a full discussion on both organic and inorganic soil, but recommends the use of the latter, especially volcanic lava.
- The European website Kaizen Bonsai (owned by Graham Potter) also has excellent information on the subject, especially on the importance of repotting. Graham Potter also states that a good bonsai soil should have absorbent ingredients which do not break down easily, the stress being on absorbent materials.

**Some independent studies and researches in bonsai soil follow:**

**The Great Soil Study 2013, USA:** During the brief ban on the import of Akadama into the USA, the Albuquerque Bonsai Club conducted a soil study to find a substitute for Akadama. (A link to the full article is reproduced below for interested readers <http://abqbonsaiclub.com/bonsai-soil-article/>). Its conclusion was:

- Akadama is probably the best soil mix component of all of the tested indigenous ingredients because it allows the tree roots to penetrate right through.
- It is possible to raise or lower soil porosity as the porosity of each component is different.
- Soils with similar CEC values provide excellent root development and growth very similar to Akadama, although Akadama has some definite advantages. and
- Better root development appears to be possible with soil mixes containing a combination of different sized particles as opposed to a single uniform size (irrespective of actual particle size).



Pumice natural stone crush



River crush red coloured



Rounded gravel



Sieved aquarium sand



Taiwanese forest or mountain soil



Unsieved River Sand

**The Reddit Soil Experiment 2014, USA:** conducted in two parts on 0-2mm, 2-5mm and 5-7mm particle sizes of the following ingredients: Turface (calcined clay), Pumice, Napa 8822 (oil absorbent), Growstone (a commercial hydroponic growing medium made from recycled glass), Chicken Grit, Peat moss, Perlite, and Pine Bark. It found that the semi-absorbent ingredients



held more water than the other harder ingredients. One additional finding of this experiment was that smaller particle size allows any component to retain more water and less air than a larger particle size of the same component.

**Soil Study by Colin Lewis:** An independent study was conducted by Colin Lewis, bonsai expert from the UK, on which an article was published in the magazine *Bonsai*, Vols 18 & 20 of 1993. He described the properties of various soil ingredients such as peat, grit, Akadama, calcined clay (brand name: Biosorb), and pumice. After experimentally growing larch seedlings for a few months in these materials, he noted with surprise that the best root growth was in peat, followed by the peat/grit combination, calcined clay, pumice, and pure grit in that order. And lastly, Akadama registered the most inferior level in root development. He however, qualified his findings by stating that experimenting needs to be done with other species and mature plant materials also to come to a definite conclusion. He voiced the possibility that some plant varieties which grow in organic soils in their natural habitats would do well in similar soils in pot culture too.

**Soil Study by Mr. Jerald P Stowell, USA:** Mr. Stowell conducted extensive research on bonsai soil. He wrote in his book *The Beginners Guide to American Bonsai* that drainage or percolation of water between two horizontal layers of different particle sizes is slower than if single particle size is used throughout the bonsai pot. He further explains that drainage in a vertical shaped pot is better than in a horizontal pot irrespective of particle size, but the smaller the particle size, the more likely are the chances of soil compaction. Taking these two factors together, he infers that both excellent water retention and good drainage are ensured by using graduated layers of small, medium, and large particles (respectively from the top to the bottom of the pot as has been used traditionally in Japan). Drainage can be further ensured, and soil compaction avoided if finer particles are sieved out of the soil, and only coarser particles are used.

**Study of soil substrates of the western coast (Konkan) in India:** Dr. Dhanashree Patil, M.Sc., B.Ed., M.Phil., Ph.D., founder member of Kolhapur Bonsai Club, India and currently Head of the Department of Botany in Dr. Balasaheb Khardekar College, Vengurle, India specializes in bio-pesticides. She examined the soil substrates of the western coastal area (known as Konkan) of Maharashtra, India, along with her students and corroborated that the laterite substrate, derived from the red laterite stone available abundantly in this region has excellent draining capacity. Dr. Patil opines that the overall soil in the region, which is a mixture of laterite, sand and organic litter, has excellent porosity and is, therefore, naturally best for the composition of bonsai soil.

## SUMMARIZATION

The findings from the preceding details have been summarized in the following section, confining our observations only to bonsai soil:

Garden earth, the oldest known, most efficiently and abundantly available growing medium, is still preferred by many bonsai enthusiasts in tropical climates, especially those with limited experience. This preference is perhaps due to free availability just as much as reliance on its nutritive value. The success rate of novices using only this one ingredient in the tropics is surprisingly high. However, the use of pure garden earth without any additives can be disastrous unless the grower is experienced enough to resolve the drainage and water retention equation. Especially so when the growers' collection is so extensive that daily attention to each plant is not practical.

Drainage problems in any type of bonsai soil may be compounded if the grower does not sieve out and discard the fine particles from bonsai soil. Sieving out fine particles is avoided because it is time-consuming, and the wastage of expensive ingredients is usually not less than 50%, most times as high as 75%. However, sieving out the fines is well worth the trouble as it eliminates the major cause of soil compaction.

Soil also tends to compact due to excessively dense root growth over time. Bonsai, which have not been repotted for a long time, become root-bound. Most of the soil content is eventually pushed out of the drainage holes by the growing root mass. Compaction builds pressure in the pot, hampering permeation of water and prevents the exchange of fresh air in the compacted root ball. This hampers the growth of the bonsai and ultimately pushes it to the point of death. The remedy is timely repotting, preferably in soil having larger particles.

The seasonal water requirement of plants is also a significant factor in the soil ingredient equation. Unless manure laden soil contains a sufficient proportion of tensile ingredients to facilitate drainage, it will retain too much moisture in the pot during winter. This may become a handicap when watering is routinely done, and there is a failure to notice or take into account the seasonal water requirements of the plants. The continued or unnoticed wet condition of the soil in winter is likely to result in weak root/vegetative growth (soil needs to be alternatively wet and dry for the development and even survival of roots; most plants abhor too much sogginess in soil). In the summer heat, which follows the winter, these bonsai get stressed out as sufficient feeder roots have not generated yet to encourage and support new vegetative growth. So there is a lack of optimum growth even during the growing season.

[Most times it is difficult to understand that it is better to underwater than over water the plants especially during the winter months]

I found corroboration of this aspect in a post by Michael Hagedorn (bonsai master and author of the bonsai book entitled *Post Dated: Autobiography of an Irreverent Monk*, who lives in the temperate region of USA). He stated that if bonsai is over-watered or if the soil simply never dries out during the winter months, the roots of a bonsai would never be encouraged to hunt out water, and it won't have enough roots. These trees could survive in the moist, cool weather on about three roots, but on the first hot day, they would get hard hit as they would have a spindly root system, not enough to support their overlarge, over long leaves and shoots on dry, hot days. (A bonsai version of a company that has overspent just before a recession.) So he recommended that especially on cool overcast days, if you can monitor them, water each tree only when it is drying out and not by rote. He added that watering by a schedule is the surest way to have some feeble trees that show themselves in the hot summer.

The impracticality of watering more than once daily is the rule rather than an exception in the case of most of bonsai practitioners. Therefore, the use of any soil combination in any climatic region needs to take into account this essential universal limitation.

The inclusion of local substrates as the major proportion of bonsai soil always works better for local plant varieties. Plants in containers prefer soil conditions (including a garden earth base) to be equivalent to or as close as possible to the growing conditions of their natural habitat. That is perhaps why, while digging up a plant from nature (yamadori), it is recommended to collect some soil from the place where the plant was growing. Apart from providing the same growing media, it also ensures the collection of local mycorrhizae or benevolent fungi that share a symbiotic relationship with the roots. And it increases its chances of survival, both factors being helpful in the re-establishment of the collected plant.



## International experts consulted for the ingredients in their bonsai soil

Name of the bonsai master	Country and Continent	Climatic zone	Ingredients used and recommended
Mashahiko Kimura (through his student Andrei Bessanov)	Saitama Prefecture, Japan (Asia)	Sub-tropical to Temperate	A sieved mix of Akadama, Hyuga (pumice) and Kiryu
Koji Hiramatsu	Takamatsu, Japan (Asia)	Sub-tropical to Temperate	Sieved mix of 70% Akadama, 20% Kiryu, 10% river sand plus bits of bamboo charcoal. For conifers, the percentage of akadama is reduced.
Jerry Meislik (unique in that his ficus bonsai are grown indoors under lights)	Whitefish, Montana, USA	Temperate	Mainly red lava 3/4mm, 20% bark chips or 20% fused glass, perlite or gravel makes a very fast draining mix
Andy Youtz	Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, USA	Temperate	1/3rd each of Akadama, Lava and Pumice. Straight Kanuma for acid-loving plants
Tony Bebb	Queensland, Australia	Tropical	Depending on climate (heat/humidity, etc.), a balance of water and air: 2 types of grit/gravel, stone, composted bark and peat moss. For conifers, some granite and a bit of charcoal.
Robert Stevens	Yogyakarta, Indonesia	Equatorial	Volcanic lava pure
Budi Sulistyono	Jakarta, Indonesia	Equatorial	80% volcanic sand and 20% humus
Mike Siow	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Equatorial	For mature plants: Maba and Premna: 80% lava, 20% akadama; Wrightia: 0% Burnt red soil, 20% mountain or river sand; Junipers: 60% akadama, 40% mountain or river sand; Other deciduous species: 70% burnt red soil, 30% mountain, or river sand.
Nabe Milares	Manila, Phillippines	Tropical	Washed sand used generally
Poncevic Ceballos	Manila, Phillippines	Tropical	1/3rd each of garden soil, river sand and compost.
Vinh Lvninh	Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam	Tropical	Clay, garden earth, rice husk raw or burnt, cocopeat, the composition depending on the variety.
Ho Jan Lee	Tainan, Taiwan	Near Tropical	Akadama and mountain sand
Bangladesh Bonsai Club	Bangladesh	Tropical	Garden earth 50%, Sand 20%, 30% compost

Both surface tension and gravity have a role to play in bonsai soil. Water adheres to the surface of soil particles due to surface tension and drains from the pot due to gravity. Smaller particles of soil give a greater surface area for water to adhere to, and therefore higher water retention as surface tension is greater than the effects of gravity. Since larger particles mean lesser surface area for water to adhere, it results in less water retention and faster drainage as the effects of gravity are stronger than surface tension. It is, therefore, evident that if a bonsai soil has to drain faster, the particles in its pot need to be as large as the pot will allow. If water retention is as necessary as drainage, soil particles need to be only as large as or smaller as the requirements of the plant and climatic conditions will allow.

It has been observed that larger and mixed particle size ingredients allow more pore spaces than those available in smaller and evenly sized particles. In other words, the oxygen exchange and consequent root growth are better in larger and mixed sized particles.

It is advantageous to incorporate organic ingredients in tropical climates because most of these ingredients are negatively charged (Anions), which facilitate better cation exchange when positively charged fertilizer cations are released into the soil.

If major elements in a soil composition are blindly copied and incorporated as they are from climatic conditions which are dissimilar to local climatic conditions, they may not provide a favorable growing medium for the domestic plant variety. They may prove detrimental to such local plants in the long run.

## CONCLUSION

Ideally, a bonsai will need repotting only when the roots are about to reach a pot-bound state, and its rate of growth slows down. This will happen sooner or later, no matter what soil combination used initially, but earlier if the smaller particle size is used (in the pot) and after a few years if bigger or mixed particles have been used.

Further, there will always be situations when a bonsai needs emergency repotting. Repotting could be needed because its health has started to decline due to poor drainage from compacted soil or if the soil does not dry out between watering due to tiny particle size. It can be due to a high proportion of water-retaining ingredients used or if there is a severe pest infestation in the soil or due to some other unspecific emergent situation. The grower would need to ascertain and pinpoint the cause for the problem. This could be the composition of his/her old bonsai soil. If that is the root cause, make suitable amendments as the situation demands, by incorporating a higher proportion of tensile ingredients for better drainage or more of organic content if better water retention is required.

It would, however, be impossible to specify a single soil composition for all climatic conditions and all plant varieties. At best, it can only be suggested what soil combination is likely to work best in specific given conditions. Each bonsai grower needs to assess the requirements of water and humidity, sunlight or shade for his/her bonsai and plants, the capacity of watering multiple times, etc. while using a particular soil



## Representative soil combinations used by bonsai growers across India

Name of the bonsai grower	Region in India	Ingredients used and recommended
Shashwat Pathak	Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh	1 part each: Garden soil, river sand, leaf mold, brick pieces and a handful of bone meal
Priyanshi Dayanand	Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh	Sieved garden earth, cow manure, river sand, gravel and neem ( <i>azadirachta indica</i> ) powder
Sanjay Sharma	Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh	1 part each: Clayey soil (black cotton soil, yellow soil, fine sand), compost and ½ part coarse river sand
Reva Jain	Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh	3 parts each of black soil, compost, 1 part each of sand, brick crush and some neem or rapeseed cake and cocopeat
Harish Jog	Indore, Madhya Pradesh	½ part each of fine and coarse sand, two parts each cow manure or leaf compost, ¼ part brick crush, 1/8th part vermicompost and neem crush
Gourab Mazumdar	Kolkata, West Bengal	0% rice husk, 30% soil, 20% goat manure, 20% sand or grit and sometimes brick crush, wood charcoal, perlite and pumice
Dinesh Patidar	Vadodara, Gujarat	25% each: soil, sand, compost, 15% cocopeat, 10% bone meal
Parag Mehta	Ahmedabad, Gujarat	Expanded clay, lumpy manure, and sandstone crush
Hiren Patel	Kutch, Gujarat	20% sandy loam (locally called Goradu), 15% expanded clay and 15% Lica crust (contains calcium)
M Ponnuswamy	Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu	1 part each: red soil, cow manure/leaf mold/vermicompost, sieved sand
Shivaji K Phillips	Chennai, Tamil Nadu	300 gm each: river sand, compost, garden soil; 150 gm leaf mold, 50 gm perlite, 25 gm each; neem cake, peanut cake, linseed cake, 50 gm micronutrients, and cocopeat and vermiculite
Madhusoodan Reddy	Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh	25% red soil, 25% sand, 50% goat manure
Ravindran Damodaran	Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu	Coarse sand or coarse gravel, cow manure, and garden soil in equal proportions plus leaf mold and green leaf/softwood cuttings as necessary.

### Bibliography of reference books on bonsai soil:

*Bonsai Techniques I*, John Naka, USA

*Masters Book of Bonsai*, Japan Bonsai Association, Japan

*Bonsai Miniature Potted trees*, Shufunotomo Co. Ltd, Japan

*Penjing: The Chinese Art of Bonsai*, Zhao Qingquan, China

*Bonsai*, Luigi Crespi, Italy

*Bonsai-The Complete Guide to Art and Technique*, Paul Lesniewicz, Germany

*Beginners Guide to American Bonsai*, Jerard P Stowell, USA

*Bonsai Secrets*, Peter Chan, England

*Bonsai, Its Art, Science, History and Philosophy*, Deborah Koreshoff, Australia

*Ficus – The Exotic Bonsai*, Jerry Meislik, USA

*A Dwarf Tree Manual for Westerners*, Samuel Newsom, USA

combination. Ultimately it is the individual grower who has to decide what soil suits best for his/her climate and plant varieties. Still, we presume that the foregoing study will give a better insight into bonsai soil (I fervently hope it does not create more confusion) and help in that decision.

So to conclude, we can say that it would be better to use a proportion of manure or other organic matters in the preparation of bonsai soil in tropical climates mainly because it will improve CEC and also provide much-needed humidity. At the same time, the incorporation of an equal or higher proportion of tensile ingredients will ensure good drainage. Whereas in temperate or colder climates, since humidity is not an issue, it would be preferable to use a high proportion of tensile ingredients (including local soil) but also include porous granular particles in the soil to introduce CEC.

### MY OWN EXPERIENCE

I have subscribed to the belief in the foremost importance of bonsai soil right from the beginning. This awareness was influenced by my bonsai Guru Ratna Dave, bonsai exponent from Mumbai, and her insistence on sieving out the fines whenever we discussed the subject of bonsai soil. I have expended a lot of time and energy in the quest for an ideal recipe for bonsai soil like many a bonsai enthusiast and, in the process, have experimented with different types and varieties of ingredients trying them out in varying proportions interchangeably and also the tensile ones exclusively.

Based on my personal experience of more than thirty-eight years of practicing bonsai, during twenty-six years of which I have also been teaching the art and science of bonsai. I advocate the following formula considering the climatic conditions of my locality. Well draining

tensile ingredients 40%; manure and humus to the extent of 40%; and common garden earth 20% by volume as a standard bonsai soil mix for most tropical species. The tensile ingredients would be increased to 70% or more with no garden earth component for coniferous varieties. For fruiting varieties, use a mix of equal proportions of the above, and if necessary additional nutritive content would be added.

Of the ingredients I have used, I find that brick crush, river sand, stone crush, foundry slag, anthracite coal crush, calcined clay balls, etc., have good tensile strength and therefore facilitate good drainage. Pumice, vermiculite, and perlite have good CEC. Coco-peat, vermiculite, and humus can retain moisture for a comparatively longer time. Cow/buffalo/goat/horse manure, vermicompost, humus, and common garden earth all have good nutritive value and also retain moisture. Of the above, both brick crush and pumice, being semi-absorbent, have the best CEC.

Happy Bonsai to you all. 🌳

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Rajeev Vaidya, India. Advisory Committee Member, South Asia Bonsai Federation (SABF); President, Bonsai Enthusiasts Club of Thane Dombivali; administrative committee member, Phoenix 2020 (November 2020); owner of Rucha Bonsai Nursery. Has 100+ titles on bonsai. Into bonsai since 1984; teaching since 1990. Solo exhibition at home-town Dombivali (Oct 1996); several demonstrations/workshops. Demonstrated at 35th PPBI, Bali, Indonesia (Oct. 2014); demonstrator and judge at Flora Filipina Expo 2019, Manila, Philippines (Feb 2019).

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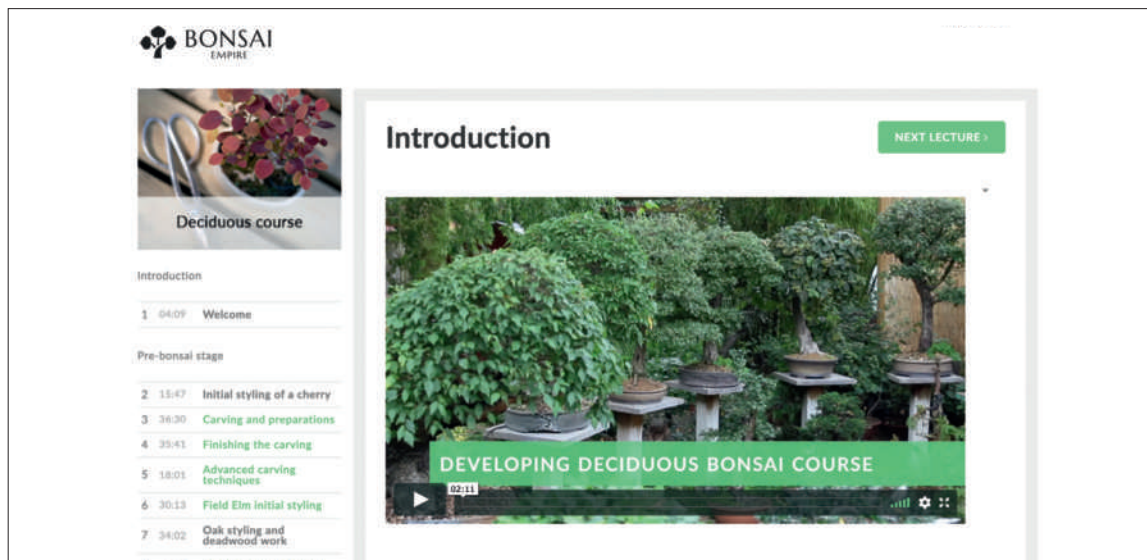


## Developing Deciduous Bonsai

Three free lessons are available for preview.

26 Lectures, 10 hours duration, \$64.99 for lifetime access.

Teachers (Mauro Stemberger, Walter Pall and Harry Harrington) explain how goals, as well as techniques, should be approached differently in the main developmental stages of Deciduous Bonsai. Learn about setting the main branch structure of a tree, creating ramification, carving, deciduous apex design, yamadori collection, wiring, creating rock plantings and much more.



Top to bottom:  
Harry Harrington, UK.  
Mauro Stemberger, Italy  
Walter Pall, Germany

## Online Bonsai Education Developing Deciduous Bonsai

By Joe Grande, Canada

**B**onsai Empire continues to innovate and provide much-needed bonsai education. Their newest offering is all about deciduous trees featuring *Prunus*, *Ulmus*, *Quercus*, *Carpinus*, and *Acer* genera. The lectures and demonstrations are provided by three leading bonsai artists and teachers.

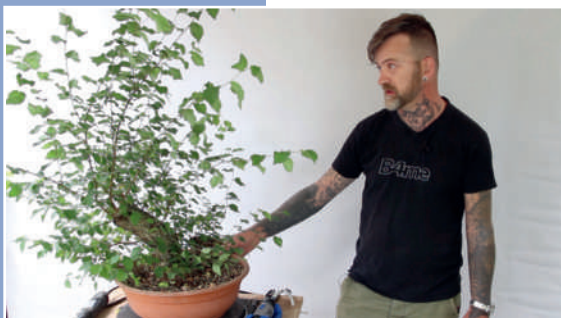
Harry Harrington shows us masterly carving skills on a field Elm in four segments: Carving Preparations, Finishing the Carving, Advanced Carving Techniques, and the Initial Styling of the Elm. His demonstrations are easy to follow, and he provides excellent advice so that you, too, can choose the right tools and technique for the job at hand. The final results look incredibly natural. Who needs time and weather when you can carve like Harry?

Mauro Stemberger uses two species, Cherry and Oak, to demonstrate deadwood work, defoliation, development planning, styling, and branch selection. His demonstrations are thorough and provide lots of take-aways.

Walter Pall, a well-known and respected bonsai pioneer, artist, and educator, introduces a powerful technique with a controversial name: Hedge Pruning. This method allows you to develop better, faster, ramification, and maintain a large number of trees. He explains the theory in detail, demonstrates the work and discusses the seasonal timing. He uses this approach on his collection of almost 1000 trees, which he admits, is too many for a single person. Then he tells a story of how he discovered this technique over 15 years ago. Since then, maintenance work has become more manageable. In a follow-up lesson, he defoliates the entire tree and shows how to edit branches to improve the structure.

Online Bonsai Education has never been better. There's a wealth of knowledge delivered to our screens in high definition videos by top bonsai artists and educators from all over the world. Whether it's Bonsai Empire, Bonsai Mirai Live, or Bjorn Bjorholm's Bonsai U, the benefits of engaging with these resources will elevate the quality of your bonsai with craft-based techniques, horticultural knowledge, seasonal practices, and design advice.

A word of warning. Once you engage Online, sophisticated algorithms will flag you as a consumer of bonsai knowledge. They will deliver a tsunami of videos on bonsai for your perusal. Choose wisely, and remember to save some time to actually work on your trees! 🌳





# Vigorous, strong, flexible, and excellent COLORADO BLUE SPRUCE

By Mauro Stemberger, Italy. Photos by Tim Priest

**T**he *Picea* genus has some excellent attributes, and you can find quite a few distinguished species all over the world. One of the most beautiful species out there is the Colorado Blue spruce, a beautiful conifer with delightful blue-gray color, that is native to northern USA and Canada. Its crown becomes cylindrical in shape as it matures. Especially in Colorado is possible to find pure, beautiful yamadori blue spruce growing on rock or in the wetland on an old river bed. The spruce tree, in its natural habitat, is a large tree that can grow up to 60 meters (approximately 200 feet). They come from the *Pinaceae* Family, genus *Picea*, which consists of roughly 35 species, with origins in North America, Canada, or Northern Europe and Asia. Some of the most common are known to be the Norway spruce (*Picea abies*), also known as the European spruce, the Ezo spruce (*Picea jezoensis*) in Japan and Asia, and the blue spruce (*Picea pungens*) in North America. North America has some other very interesting species of spruce, like Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*) and Black Hills (*Picea glauca*) that are also good for bonsai.







Views of all four sides of the tree.



Colorado Blue is one of my favorite trees in the US; vigorous, strong, flexible, and excellent to make beautiful bonsai.

This Blue Spruce was collected by Todd Schlafer in Colorado a few years ago, and this past Spring, my client Tom Ungrey purchased the tree during the annual Michigan show. The tree was left free to grow all season and fertilized. When I came back to Grand Rapids, it was ready to work.

Autumn is a perfect time, as is early Spring to work this native. Remember: if you style spruce in Autumn, you have to protect it from cold wind during wintertime.





I started studying the tree to find the best front and angle. The general movement of the tree is straight with some nice shari on one side of the trunk and a lot of branches coming from the same spot.

I decided to lift the tree up to highlight the line of the trunk because I want to create a classic tree but with a nice dynamism using the long branches.



In this period, because the tree is creating vascular tissue, it is good to protect branches with raffia during bending. I also use black plastic tape for extra care.



I always visualize my final goal when I work on a new tree. Cut the unnecessary branches, create deadwood. For this particular tree, I created some ten jins (apical jins) to visually have the image of an old spruce growing on the side of a hill in the Rocky Mountains.



The wiring is essential to have the best result, so I apply wire on the structure according to the position I want to bend the branches.

Slowly the shape from the lower part up to the top starts appearing.





The movement of the right branches is critical to dynamize the overall composition. The left part counterbalances the right one.

Guy-wires are used to secure branches in position, so no over-wiring is needed.







The final touch is the apex moving to the right and the nice ten-jin providing an ancient image.

Working this yamadori is always fun and challenging. My goal is to create a bonsai with character and a good soul.

Remember, during hot summer shade and water are very important for successfully growing this great North American native. 🌲



**A note from the owner:**

I started in the bonsai hobby 25 years ago when the only assistance and instruction came from the books I bought. In the late '90s, I heard about a bonsai club that had just started in my area that met at the local garden center and consisted of 4 or 5 members. Fast forward 25 years, and one of the original club members, Steve Jetzer, is now a neighbor, great friend, and fellow bonsai enthusiast.

My introduction to Mauro came from my friendship with Steve Jetzer and Tim Priest, who were both having trees worked on annually with

Mauro about 5 years ago. Working with Mauro and getting to know his style, teaching techniques, and amazing transformation of yamadori material made me reassess the future of my own bonsai collection. Years of attending bonsai shows, I have always found one more tree or two that I had to purchase and add to my collection. I inevitably built more and more benches to display my “consumer bonsai,” as Mauro described my collection. Last Spring, I sold more than 15 trees, and now I am concentrating more on quality over quantity. I plan to sell another half dozen trees again this Spring and use the proceeds to join Mauro’s intensive program at Hidden Gardens in Chicago. Mauro has taught me that working on a limited number of better quality trees will not only be easy to time-manage their daily requirements but will also display better with more visual space between each tree.

The tree in this article was purchased through Todd Schlafer and styled by Mauro over a single day last year. I am planning on having a custom pot for the tree made by one of Mauro’s colleagues. Mauro has an excellent idea for a specific type of container, and we are working through the plans.

I have never been more excited about the bonsai hobby, the access to global bonsai masters such as Mauro, and the abundance of invaluable resources both Online and in print. Looking forward to seeing everyone at the National show in September!

— Tom Ungrey





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