



The Art of Kusamono

National Bonsai & Penjing Museum



Arrangement by Young Choe - Ceramic by Ron Lang

KUSAMONO

Humble Elegance On Display

*By Kathleen Emerson-Dell
Assistant Curator*

In July, we feted the opening of a new type of exhibit at the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum. The exhibition focused on a companion art to the art of bonsai—namely, the art of kusamono. Kusamono are potted arrangements of wild grasses and flowers in unique pots or trays. The name is composed of two Japanese characters—“grass” and “thing”—which together suggest humble, everyday plants or even weeds. Originally, this name referred to the small, potted grasses displayed next to bonsai as accent plants.

More recently, kusamono has developed into an art form of its own. A well-chosen kusamono reflects the season in which it is displayed. Some compositions are designed to include plants that will look good in several seasons. Besides the season, a kusamono should suggest a specific natural habitat—such as a wetland, meadow or woodland. Whether using a single plant or a group of plants, there are three basic styles of planting: moss-ball, out-of-pot, or in a container.

While the final effect is one of artless nature, a great deal of time and preparation went into achieving that look for our exhibition. **Young Choe**, a kusamono artist and volunteer at the Museum, began preparing soil mixtures in January. The soil mix depends on the pH, moisture and nutrient needs of the plants, as well as the planting style. For example, to form a moss-ball, you need a “sticky” highly organic muck that will hold together in a ball shape when placed on flat tiles. Young achieved the

Photo: Joseph Mullian



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President's Letter



With the fall colors appearing on the Museum's bonsai, we see the beginning of a major revitalization in the neighborhood of the U.S. National Arboretum.

As downtown development expands in the direction of the National Arboretum, prestigious developers like **Jim Abdo**, working with former D.C. Deputy Mayor **Eric Price**, have realized that the beautiful 440 acres that the Arboretum occupies inside our Nation's Capitol can be the "green" centerpiece for a major rejuvenation of this part of Washington which serves as the City's eastern gateway.

As we await this coming renaissance in the Museum's part of town, NBF has joined with the U.S. National Arboretum and the Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA) to collaborate on a marketing plan to promote both the Museum and the Arboretum to larger audiences. NBF's Honorary Director **Barbara Marshall** is the motivating force behind this effort, which will be focused on

enhancing the visibility of the Museum and the Arboretum. This, in turn, should improve attendance at special events like the Kusamono and Chrysanthemum Stone Exhibitions most recently mounted by the Museum, as well as generally raise the level of appreciation for the art of bonsai.

At the same time, NBF has challenged the members of its Board of Directors to double our membership. In response, NBF Director **Dave Bogan**, who lives in Lynnville, Indiana, has set the bar very high for his fellow Directors, having recruited more than 15 new NBF members. Dave's secret seems to be to attend bonsai conventions in different parts of the country, as well as his own bonsai club and other club meetings in his surrounding area, where he makes sure that everyone in attendance knows that it is their patriotic duty to join NBF to support our one and only National Bonsai & Penjing Museum.

These invigorating changes in the neighborhood, the favorable prospects for expanding appreciation of the Museum, and a growing NBF membership all seem like auspicious developments for this brisk autumn season.

Felix

Jack Cardon elected to NBF Board of Directors

Jack Cardon, who has been a volunteer in the Museum for 20 years, was recently elected to the NBF Board of Directors. Jack, a native of Salt Lake City, is a retired attorney who practiced law in Washington, D.C. for many years.

In addition to volunteering in the Museum, he has given special tours of the collections, done many demonstrations and been a docent. In the past, working with **Janet Lanman**, he headed up a program adopted by the Potomac Bonsai Association to make bonsai known to school students in the Washington Metropolitan area. In recent years he was a demonstrator at the Museum booth

during the National Cherry Blossom Festival.

Some of Jack's own bonsai can be viewed at the NBF website on the exhibits page.



Janet Lanman with Edythe and Jack Cardon at the Kusamono Reception.

KUSAMONO, Humble Elegance on Display

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right degree of stickiness by combining soils from Tennessee, Upstate New York, and Maryland's Eastern Shore in different ratios. To create material for her compositions, she sowed seeds in the greenhouse in March, choosing many plants native to the mid-Atlantic region. She also collected living plant materials from the wild and from nurseries. Finding the right moss to cover the muck was a bit of a challenge. The moss should be thin and pliant in order to adhere well, especially on the rounded root-balls. Moss is used not only for a pleasing aesthetic, as in bonsai displays, but also to help hold the muck together and retard evaporation.

When these preliminary preparations were underway, Young began to think of the ceramic containers she would need for the arrangements. Ideally, the plants should have a couple of months to settle in and be styled. Noted bonsai ceramicist, **Ron Lang**, was brought into the project in February. He and his wife, **Sharon Edwards-Russell**, created many of the

wood-fired tiles and containers used in the exhibition. They have generously donated these ceramics to the museum.

Watching Young create her compositions—selecting the plant combinations and matching them to containers—was like watching a painter work with a palette of different colors and textures. In the end, we used only about a third of the kusamono that were created, since the others had passed their prime by the time of the exhibition. However, the beauty of kusamono is that they will survive for many seasons if properly cared for. We are already planning another exhibit and workshop for May of next year!

Please visit the NBF website to view images of the Kusamono display: www.bonsai-nbf.org



Young Choe preparing for the exhibit.

Photo: Museum Staff

CURATORS CORNER

Watering Bonsai

By Jim Hughes

The most commonly asked question that museum staff members get is “How often do you water the bonsai?” The person asking the question usually expects a simple, straightforward answer, like “every 3 days,” even though the question they ask, in fact, has a complicated answer.

For people who ask the question as they are walking away, I usually respond: “Whenever they need it.” This answer is enough for some visitors. If they seem interested in learning more, I might add: “Usually once a day during a typical summer day, but that depends upon many variables. During the fall and winter we water less frequently.” Many are satisfied with that additional information.

For the visitor who is asking for a serious answer and wants to know more, I start to talk about some of the variables that we weigh when watering each bonsai.

For starters, it helps if the same person waters the trees every day. That person knows if the tree was skipped yesterday or

they know if the tree was watered yesterday and whether that was done in the morning or in the afternoon. For trees in large pots, knowing what was done yesterday is very helpful since the moisture on the top of the soil is often very different than the level of moisture near the bottom of the pot. That is one of the reasons why a member of the Museum staff waters the trees rather than the volunteers who come in once a week.

The location of the bonsai in the Museum is another factor that affects decisions about watering the trees. We have many microclimates in each pavilion. Some areas get morning light and afternoon shade, some get sun most of the day, and some get only indirect light. Selecting the right tree for the right location is always important, not only for sunlight, but for how it affects watering of the tree. Each of those locations has an effect on when trees are watered, and how much water the trees will need. The trees that get morning light are the first trees we check in the morning.

Within these microclimates there are still other factors that influence how much water is given to each tree. Our sunniest locations might be fine for the crape myrtle, black pines, elms, and California junipers, but not all of them will be watered the same. The crape myrtle would be

happy getting watered twice on a warm sunny day in July while the California juniper might only get watered every other day. Location and species affect how and when we water.

In addition to location, the soil mix also affects watering greatly. Over the years different soil mixes have been used at the Museum. Now, more than ever before, we are using more mixes containing akadama and kanuma. Our watering practices have had to be altered accordingly.

After this much information even the inquisitive visitor's eyes glaze over. I skip other variables like humidity and wind. I don't even mention these questions: Is the tree recently repotted? How much of the foliage was recently pruned off the tree? Is the tree root bound? Is it in bloom? Do I have meetings all afternoon and know that I can't get back to check on the watering needs until closing time?

Recently, when a visitor saw me watering the trees, he confessed that he knew little about bonsai but loved visiting the Museum. He suggested “If I had the time, I'd love to volunteer at the Museum and help with some of the simple tasks like watering.” I couldn't help but smile.



Museum Notes

- ▶ On July 12th, NBF hosted an evening reception in the *Maria Rivera Vanzant Upper Courtyard* for invited guests. The occasion was the opening of the first *Kusamono Display* exhibit ever held in the Museum. The weather was lovely and the event was a delight for all. Please see more photos on the NBF website.



Photo: Museum Staff

Guests at the Kusamono Reception.



Volunteer Jim Rieden.

- ▶ Volunteer **Jim Rieden** has taken a one year leave of absence from the Museum. Currently living in the Philippines, Jim has already become active in the local bonsai community there.



- ▶ **Larry and Nina Ragle** visited the Museum in September and spent some time going over the Viewing Stone Collection with Assistant Curator Kathleen Emerson-Dell. Later in the

month other friends from California, **Susanne and Carroll Barrymore**, came to see Susanne's forest planting in the North American Collection.

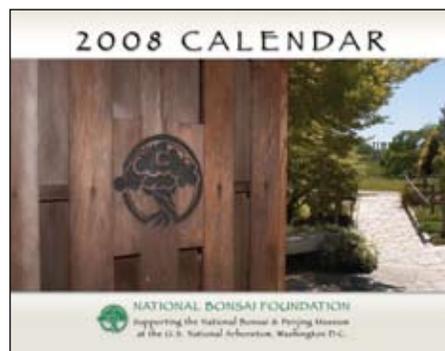


Photo: Museum Staff

Carroll and Susanne Barrymore with Susanne's Forest Planting.

2008 Museum Calendar

The 2008 calendar will be available by December 1st. The cost is \$15.00 per calendar. If you would like to purchase one or more please send a check or credit card information in the enclosed envelope.



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