



Behind the Scenes at Daiju-en Bonsai

By Jack Sustic
Museum Curator

Last November I was very privileged to travel to Japan for two weeks of study with **Tohru Suzuki** at his nursery **Daiju-en Bonsai** in Okazaki, which is about one hour's drive southeast of the city of Nagoya in Central Honshu province, and very near the historic city of Kyoto.

Mr. Suzuki is a third generation bonsai master. His grandfather **Saichi Suzuki** was best known for his work in developing and introducing the white pine *Pinus parviflora* 'Zuishyo' as bonsai material, and his father **Toshinori Suzuki** continued styling in the traditional way, as does Tohru. Their practice of expert care, and attention to detail over many years and even generations, results in a style of tree that reflects an elegant and quiet beauty.

My anticipation at the start of the journey was very high as I had spe-



Daiju-en.

cific goals to accomplish and I am happy to say that my expectations were not disappointed. There were two aspects to the trip. First, Tohru is celebrated for his knowledge of pines; in fact most of Daiju-en's 300 large bonsai are either pines or junipers. So I was looking forward to learning as much as I could from him about the care and maintenance of pines, and in particular black pines. Secondly, the *Taikan-ten* exhibit in Kyoto is held annually in the fall and features some of the best bonsai in Japan. Luckily this event coincided with my visit and, because Tohru is responsible for the exhibit preparation, this was a wonderful opportunity for me to learn more about exhibiting bonsai, including selecting the trees, preparing them for display and the actual set-up for viewing. This could only

help me to improve our own Museum tree exhibits.

I arrived at Daiju-en around 9:00 in the evening on November 6 and was warmly greeted by Tohru's family. As I stepped through the nursery gate I noticed that the apprentices were still at work in the workshop. Thus I quickly learned that working past 9 p.m. was part of their normal work day at the nursery, a day that starts at 6:30 a.m.

A typical day would begin with the two apprentices, **Isao Tokunaga** and **Yusuke Uchida**, and me weeding and picking up trash and fallen leaves until we were called for breakfast at around 7:00 a.m. Mrs. Suzuki prepared all of the meals for us and we ate together family-style. Then work resumed at 8:00 a.m. with a break for lunch at noon. Then we were back to work at 1:00 p.m. for the afternoon with a couple tea breaks if time permitted. The "official" work



The work room at Daiju-en during lunch break.



Yusuke, Isao and me at lunch.

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President's Letter



As we enjoy a beautiful springtime in the Washington, DC area, we are busy preparing for the NBF Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors to be held on April 30, 2010. Two topics are occupying much of our attention: (1) the declining physical state of the 35-year-old Japanese Pavilion at the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum, and (2) an offer from the Weyerhaeuser Company to make its Pacific Rim Bonsai Collection part of the Museum.

In February, NBF Directors **Ted Tsukiyama** and **Jane Yamashiroya** (to both of whom I am eternally grateful) joined me and their spouses on a trip to Japan to meet with **Hiroshi Takeyama**, Chairman of the Nippon Bonsai Association, and other Directors of NBA in Tokyo, and **Mr. and Mrs. Daizo Iwasaki** at their home at Takasago-an on Shikoku Island. We brought images showing the present condition of the Japanese Pavilion and presented NBF's proposed plans for its renovation. These discussions were very productive, and Chairman Takeyama recently sent us a letter confirming NBA's support for the project. As part of

the renovation, NBF hopes to honor Mr. Iwasaki for his steadfast support of the Museum over the last four decades and his unmatched worldwide efforts to promote the art and spirit of bonsai. We will keep you informed as the project moves forward.

The Pacific Rim Bonsai Collection of the Weyerhaeuser Company was closed in 2009 due to financial constraints. **Ernesta Ballard**, the daughter of **Frederic Ballard**, first President of NBF and **Ernesta Ballard**, former NBF Board Member, is a Senior Vice President of Weyerhaeuser. Earlier this year she approached NBF with a proposal to affiliate the Pacific Rim Collection with the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum. The Weyerhaeuser proposal would give the Museum a very beautiful and impressive branch in the West. This proposal will be discussed at the Board meeting and, if it is of interest to the NBF Board, we will need to explore whether we can raise sufficient funds for this project as well, and we will report on the status of this project in the next Bulletin.

Congratulations to Jack for his fascinating article on his stay with Bonsai Master **Tohru Suzaki** at Daiju-en. For anyone about to move their bonsai for an exhibit or otherwise, Jack's piece contains some excellent advice on how to do it.

Felix

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day ended at dinner around 5:00 p.m. This was only in the sense that the work on Daiju-en trees was finished for the day. After dinner, Isao and Yusuke continued to work on their personal trees until 9 or 10 each night and they called this their "practice"



One of my practice trees before work.

time. Thus I was not surprised when soon after my arrival Tohru brought three white pines to the nursery for my "practice" time. Each evening I worked on styling these trees. Tohru would come out to the workshop periodically each evening and check my progress and make comments or corrections as needed.



Practice tree after branch placement and wiring.

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Yusuke removing moss from roadside rock.

On my first full day at the nursery Yusuke and I drove out to the country early in the morning to collect moss that would be used on bonsai for upcoming exhibits including the *Taikan-ten*. Later that morning Tohru assigned to me a large needle juniper whose *jin* he felt needed a more natural appearance. Once I understood my instructions, he went about his other work, again periodically checking my progress. I used a combination of power and hand tools to rework the areas of concern, and once I was finished Tohru inspected my work, gave an affirmative nod, and made a comment of “good”. As you might imagine, I was greatly relieved!

I spent the afternoon placing moss on a tree that would be in a local exhibit the following weekend in the nearby town of Toyota. When preparing a tree for a major exhibit, it is important that a tree’s soil be completely covered with moss unless it’s a forest or *bunjin*, in which case it’s acceptable to leave the soil only partially covered. Also for smaller local exhibits it’s not considered as important to totally cover the soil with moss. In any case, as with bonsai in general, the placement of moss on the soil should look natural. Correct placement of the moss takes practice but the result of doing a good job makes all the difference in the world and can greatly improve the quality



The cut-off look of the jin appears very unnatural.



Now a more natural look.



Tohru inspecting my jin work.

of any exhibit. Some tasks such as moss placement and working on pines were the same each day.

With regard to the pines, the most important task was to remove the needles and prune them. And when time permitted Tohru would share different bonsai techniques with me. One day, he showed me his technique for bending large branches and trunks. Then on another afternoon he gave us a lesson on grafting black pines. From this I gathered two very important things to remember. The first was that, although he showed us how to graft them in November,



Black pine before bending main trunk.



Main trunk bending drastically to the left.



Black pine after branch placement and wiring.

actually grafting of black pine should be done in March or September. And secondly, be careful not to cut your finger off! I say this because one day Uchida cut the tip of his finger off,

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Bonsai are recorded and photographed.

which reminded me that I don't like the sight of blood!

One afternoon, during my first week at Daiju-en, we drove a van-load of trees to the small village of Ienazawa, which was about an hour from the nursery. The purpose of the trip was to do a photo shoot of trees for an exhibit that would be held in January of 2010. This was an interesting venture because these trees were being photographed for an exhibit that was yet to be held. I thought that the idea of photographing the trees prior to the exhibit with the intention of having the exhibit book available at the time of the show, rather than having to wait months for the book to appear, was a very clever idea.

The actual photo session was literally an assembly line. Trees were coming and going! As soon as one tree was photographed, it was whisked away, put into a van and was off for home and another tree took its place. Once the shoot was over, the photo studio, which was located in a garage, was taken down and the parts repacked. In no time at all we were heading back to the nursery.

I am sure that preparations for the annual *Taikan-ten* exhibit started long before I arrived at Daiju-en, but for me the work for this began early in my second week. We started by bringing very old and beautiful



Selection of display tables.



Stand is too large and does not harmonize well with the bonsai.



Good choice, the stand is smaller and the curved legs harmonize well with the container.

stands up from the basement of the house to the front room and gathering together accent plants that were appropriate for the season. The sliding doors on the house were removed and this revealed a perfect place for mock displays.

Tohru then began mixing and matching stands with trees and accent plants. Once he was satisfied with a display, the items were labeled and set aside in preparation for the two-hour drive to Kyoto. In all, 15 trees from Daiju-en made the trip to *Taikan-ten*. The arrangement of each specimen, accompanied by its display components, is an art that is as varied and diverse as the artist doing the work. But in all exhibit displays there are two important things to remember: harmony and focus. The bonsai is always the focus of the exhibit while the other elements should harmonize and complement the tree, but never distract or overpower it. Yet the elements in the exhibit should flow together so that they present a unified design.

The next day I spent most of the time placing moss on one tree. This would later turn out to be a grand prize winner at the *Taikan-ten*! On November 18th we completed the last minute preparations and loaded the large panel rental truck which had a layer of styrofoam on the floor covered with a carpet. Then all the



Loading trees.

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Some trees need a good soaking.

trees were well watered. Most of these were hand watered; however, the camellia and needle juniper were soaked in a tub of water for five or ten minutes as they are especially sensitive to drying out. The trees were carefully placed in the truck and braced with towels and styro-foam blocks to ensure they would not move during transport.

At 5:00 a.m. the next morning we left for Kyoto and arrived there near 7:00 a.m. The *Taikan-ten* exhibit is held in the first floor of the three-level Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art. Half of the floor was dedicated to the exhibit and the other half was given to vendors. Here any bonsai-related item could be purchased, from pots and accent plants, to books and scrolls. And of course there were bonsai for sale that anyone (certainly me!) would be most proud to have in their own collection. One word of advice though, bring money!

Participants were busy setting up their exhibits as multitudes of stun-



Vendor area.

ning trees poured into the museum throughout the morning. An experienced orchestrator, Tohru was there directing it all. To start the process, exhibitors must decide if they want their trees to be judged or not. If they didn't want their trees judged, the trees would be set up on the exhibit tables. If they wanted them to be judged, the trees would be placed on tables in the aisles for the judges to view and to choose which of these were the best.

Judging consisted of two rounds. In the first round, fifteen bonsai masters identified finalists from several different categories. Categories included: large, medium and small evergreen, large, medium and small deciduous, *bunjin*, azalea, non-traditional and shohin. Stones of different



The judges are ready.

categories were also judged. The first-round judges discussed among themselves the finalists for each category without resource to an elaborate scoring system or checklist. After the first round the judges selected the finalists, which were then grouped by category to await the second round of judging.

The second round of thirteen judges was a mix of bonsai masters and VIP's from the Kyoto area. I could feel the excitement and anticipation building as the judges took their chairs in front of the masterpieces. In this round the trees were given a number and were evaluated using a ballot system. After reviewing the trees the judges would write their selection on a ballot and a



Each category is separated by bamboo sticks.

runner would collect the ballots and they would be counted. Each winner would be announced prior to judging the next category. And each was given a named award like "The Minister of Agriculture Award" and "The Minister of Science Award". The number one tree in the whole exhibit received the "Prime Minister Award."

Remember when I said that I spent a day placing moss on a tree that would later turn out to be a big winner? You guessed it. The needle juniper that I spent the afternoon mossaing won the Prime Minister Award! No doubt this was due to the awesome mossaing job!

Once the judging was over it was time to put everything out for public display and each artist was responsible for setting up their own exhibit. In all there were 219 trees and 36 stones on display. Opening ceremonies were held Friday morning and then the exhibit quickly filled with people who were enjoying the beautiful displays brought in from all



Judges discussing the trees.

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around the country. Looking at Tohru, I could see in his face a sense of relief but also great pride for a job well done.

Time passed quickly and only too soon I found myself returning to Daiju-en to prepare for my flight back home. Reflecting on my two weeks there, many wonderful thoughts and images came to mind. Chief among these is that although Tohru was very busy with *Taikanten* preparations he still took time to share many of his techniques and bonsai knowledge with me.

Additionally, I am extremely grateful to the entire Suzuki family for making me feel so welcome. Running a family business, no matter what the business is, requires a

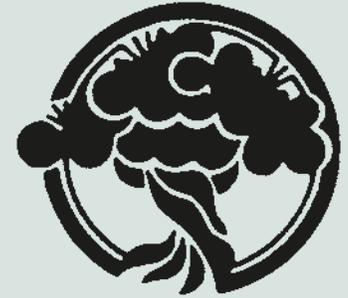
lot of time and work by everyone. And I want to pay special tribute to **Fukue**, Tohru's wife. I don't know how she managed the day-to-day operation of the household and also found time to cook three meals a day for nine people! Everyone treated me like I was a member of the family, and their kindness and willingness to welcome me into their home made a great experience even better. Finally, the apprentices and I became fast friends as they helped me in so many ways. For all of this I am truly grateful.

Two weeks went by in a flash, but I know that the knowledge that I gained through this experience will serve to benefit the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum and its collections for years to come.



Prime Minister Award winner, needle juniper, *Juniperus rigida*.

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