

# BONSAI STUDY ON TOUR

By Julian R. Adams

**F**or many of us a bonsai tour to Japan is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Everyone has an individual attitude about what might be gained from such a trip. Scenery, adventure, architecture, culture, art, people, cuisine and language are among the attractions we all find to one degree or another on a tour. When the focus of the tour is bonsai, all of the other attractions remain but the idea should be to learn as much about bonsai as possible during the trip. If the trip is to Japan, it seems prudent to take advantage of the opportunity to imprint on one's mind the styles and presentation of Japan's bonsai masters. Another major consideration is to observe carefully to determine the techniques used by those at the pinnacle of bonsai artistry.

I have been fortunate to make several trips to Japan and Korea with Bill Valavanis. The primary reason for these trips has been to study bonsai and to bring the knowledge home for application to my own collection and creation efforts. On these trips four fertile venues for study have been included in various combinations, depending on the trip. These venues are formal exhibitions, exhibition vendor areas, bonsai masters' gardens and bonsai production farms. Each of these venues calls for a slightly different approach when visited for the purpose of learning.

## Japan National Bonsai Exhibition

Held annually in early February in Tokyo, the Japan National Bonsai Exhibition, "Kokufu Bonsai Ten" is the finest bonsai exhibition in the world. The Japanese Bonsai Cooperative sponsors a vendor area at the nearby Ueno Green Club at the same time as this exhibition.

Since exhibitions and vendor areas are usually held simultaneously, I will use my approach to the Japan National Bonsai Exhibition and the Ueno Green Club vendor area as a suggested way to extract the maximum



*Balcony view of one of the four rooms at the National Bonsai Exhibition held in the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. This room has large size bonsai while the room on the upper left has medium size bonsai.*

*Below— Top view of a section of the bonsai exhibition. Here one can study the placement of each bonsai display and also the overall silhouette of each masterpiece.*



WM. N. VALAVANIS PHOTOS

bonsai information for later use in one's own bonsai activities.

Large bonsai exhibitions of this caliber are intellectually and sensually overwhelming at first. The best course of action is to get in the crowd, walk through the entire exhibit, and be overwhelmed. A few things may stick in the mind but the main idea of the first trip through is to see how the exhibit is laid out, get a feel for what is there, note items of interest for special attention, and get past being overwhelmed.

At an exhibit such as the Japan National Bonsai Exhibition, almost everything will seem perfect. Perfect trunks, perfect foliage, perfect accents, perfect stands, and perfect pots will be everywhere. There will be imperfections but they will be very skillfully hidden. The best use of such a situation is to grasp and retain that which is perfect. Camera usage will normally be forbidden so one must trust the mind and/or note book to permanently record the salient features. Many of the top exhibitions, such as this exhibition, offer photo albums of all the trees on exhibit which are very useful for recollection and additional study when one returns home.

At the Japan National Bonsai Exhibition there are several hundred bonsai on display. This demands that a systematic approach to their study be undertaken if one is to make full use of the opportunity. Three or four days is barely enough time to fully absorb it all. After the first overwhelming look at the trees, a second viewing should be made to absorb the totality of each design. Unusually appealing and unusually unappealing trees should be noted for further study.

Since the art of bonsai deals with the artistic arrangement of various design elements to create the entire composition, the study of a large exhibition can be facilitated by concentrating on the design elements one at a time with little regard to any particular total design. After the first two viewings, it is time to revisit the exhibited trees several more times with the goal of concentrating on design elements one at a time. Each additional trip through the exhibit should concentrate on a single design element, e.g. trunks, limbs, silhouettes, pots, roots, foliage, deadwood, stands or accents. This is clearly a job for more than one day.

Among the things to observe at the exhibit for each element under study are the following:

**Trunks**— size, movement, direction, taper, pot placement

**Limbs**— size, point of attachment, relative location, angle from trunk, contribution to silhouette, ramification, contribution to the overall theme

**Silhouette**— overall shape, position over pot, apex treatment, balance, stability

**Pots**— support of composition through shape, color, visual weight, size, depth

**Roots**— aged appearance, supportive of trunk, ramification

**Foliage**— health, pad shape and size, leaf size, uniformity of vigor, needle orientation, texture

**Deadwood**— relation to focal point, credibility of position and texture, contribution to silhouette, color

**Stands**— type, color, texture, size, support of visual weight and theme of bonsai

**Accents**— plant or stone, flat stand, pot, appropriate season, species, support of main tree theme

The Japan National Bonsai Exhibition is held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. A unique facet of this location is that there are several balcony vantage points where the trees may be viewed from above. This is useful in observing how the foliage is distributed on the bonsai as viewed from above. It is clear that the foliage is arranged in a manner which favors viewing from the front of the bonsai.

### Ueno Green Club

When one's senses start to dull, it is suggested that a trip to the vending area will create a change of pace that refreshes the mind. The things to see at the vendor area are bonsai and bonsai related but are presented in a manner that is entirely different from the exhibition. The vendor area is mostly thought of as a place to shop. I think of it as a terrific place to learn as well.

The Ueno Green Club is the headquarters for the Japan Bonsai Cooperative. In this three-story building they hold auctions, exhibitions and meetings. During the Japan National Bonsai exhibition three or four free shuttle buses continuously transport visitors from the Exhibition to the Ueno Green Club where all three floors and a large parking lot are transformed to a sales area.

The atmosphere is a stark contrast with the atmosphere of perfec-

*The Ueno Green Club on the left is the three story headquarters for the Japan Bonsai Cooperative where exhibits, auctions, sales and meetings are held. During the National Bonsai Exhibition the parking lot is transformed into a sales area, in addition to all three levels of the building.*



tion that is pervasive at the Japan National Bonsai Exhibition. Space is at a premium so the vendors' wares are crowded and there are many distractions. In addition to stands, pots, tools, books, wire, and more, there

are thousands of bonsai in every stage from seeds to seedlings to pre-bonsai to partly trained bonsai to world class finished bonsai.

Close observation throughout the area provides insight into the tech-

niques used to produce the fine bonsai for which Japan is famous. Unlike the exhibition environment, vendors will allow photography and, better still, one is allowed to pick up and touch most of the plants offered. This is the perfect place to allow one's mind to digest the observations of the previous trip through the exhibit to study design elements. Everything in the vendor area bears a price tag with the exception of some of the world class bonsai. This is a wonderful guide to the relative value placed by the Japanese on bonsai according to stage of development, size, species, etc. It is clear that the Japanese market fully appreciates the skill, time, and effort required to fully wire and refine a finished bonsai.

### Bonsai Gardens

Gardens or studios of the bonsai masters all have their individual character but still have common features. Almost all will have numerous exquisite bonsai, some displayed in the traditional tokonoma, bonsai for sale in all price ranges, bonsai in training and other bonsai related items of all sorts. Since most of these gardens are working bonsai studios it is very instructive to look beyond the most attractively displayed trees. As with the Japan National Bonsai Exhibition, one can easily be overwhelmed. By all means take in the best finished trees and how they are presented but save some of your time in each garden to look at the work in progress.

A treasure trove of techniques for styling, bending, potting, wiring,

*Juniper bonsai being airlayered at the bonsai garden of Masahiko Kimura where training techniques can easily be studied.*



*At the outdoor sales area of the Ueno Green Club bonsai, prebonsai, containers, tools, soil and seeds can be found for sale. Note many of the large size bonsai on the roof are sold as bare-root specimens.*

*The three floors of the Ueno Green Club are full of masterpiece bonsai, antique containers, books, tools, suiseki, scrolls and other artifacts for bonsai creation and enjoyment.*



growing, etc., will be in plain view, though likely not in a prime display position. Some of the most interesting observations will be made in the most out of the way corners where near masterpieces are gradually submitting to the training technique being applied. The actual work area is usually accessible and can reveal many useful ideas for one's own bonsai work area.

### Bonsai Farms

Bonsai farms are usually in the more rural areas, away from the well-known studios. These are the places where small plants or seedlings are grown and trained to the stage of being commercial bonsai or top quality prebonsai. Jacks, chains, saws, guy wires and other heavy duty training devices seldom seen in the United States are commonly employed at this stage of a bonsai's evolution. Each of these small farms will tend to have a specialty such as size, species or style. Again, close observation will reveal many techniques useful in the training of bonsai in one's own garden.

If you have not yet experienced a properly led tour to the Japanese bonsai world, save your pennies, pick a time, and plan to go. A truly serious bonsai artist who is willing to study the venues visited will make substantial improvement in his appreciation and skill with bonsai. A word of caution: Once the first trip has been made, you will want to go again and again.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR Julian R. Adams

Julian Adams is a bonsai author, instructor and exhibitor from Lynchburg, Virginia. He is the proprietor of Adams Motors Company and Adam's Bonsai, a retail bonsai business.

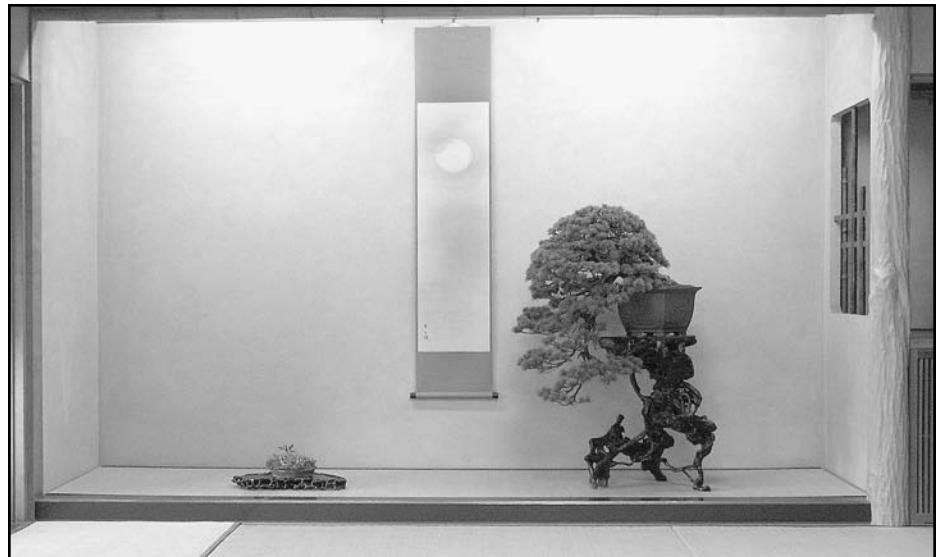
Mr. Adams experiments with various propagation and growing techniques and his engineering background has led him to new innovations in cultivating and training bonsai. This background has also provided him with a solid background for designing and constructing his bonsai garden and other innovations.

Annealed copper wire is one of his specialties and Mr. Adams supplies many nurseries with the traditional training wire. Mr. Adams has authored several articles in past issues.



*Tour members studying the bonsai and rock plantings at the Mansei-en Bonsai Garden of the Kato family in Omiya Bonsai Village, Japan.*

*Each day a different tokonoma alcove display is set up for visitors at Mansei-en Bonsai Garden. A cascade style Japanese five-needle pine is displayed with autumn wild flowers and a scroll with a moon theme.*



*Bonsai farm production areas are also visited. This field is full of Japanese five-needle pine prebonsai all grown from seed. Note the bushy specimens in the background and the small younger seedlings in the front.*

