



Roots & Branches

The Origins and Directions of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society

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John Naka Visits Michigan

John Yoshio Naka was born August 16, 1914, in Ft. Lupton, Colorado. When he was eight years of age he moved to Fukuoka, Japan, with his parents to care for his aging grandfather. While there, he learned about bonsai ... Naka returned to the United States in 1935 and settled in Wattenberg, Colorado, where he worked as a farmer with his brother Sadao (Sam). He remained in Colorado until 1946, when he moved to Los Angeles with his wife, Alice. In Los Angeles, Naka lived next door to a disciple of the bonsai teacher Sam Takekichi Doi, and under Doi's tutelage, he studied all facets of the art form.

*In the early 1950s, he began exhibiting his works to great acclaim and lectured widely on bonsai in Japanese and English. In 1973, after 14 years of preparation, his book *Bonsai Techniques* was published. In 1976, he helped launch the National Bonsai Foundation, which aimed to establish a permanent public display of North American bonsai at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C.*

*Naka published a second book, *Bonsai Techniques II*, in 1982, and in 1985 the emperor of Japan conferred upon him that country's highest award given to a noncitizen, The Fifth Class Order of the Rising Sun. Over the years Naka became active in many nonprofit bonsai organizations, participated as a teacher and speaker at numerous conferences and programs, and was guest curator for exhibitions on bonsai.*

Throughout his life, he has continued to teach and promote his art. "What I like about bonsai is that it has a beginning, but no end," he says. "A bud today becomes a branch tomorrow. It is like searching for the rainbow's end; the farther it is pursued, the farther away it is. There are no borders in bonsai. The dove of peace flies to palace as to humble house, to young as old, to rich or poor. So does the spirit of bonsai."

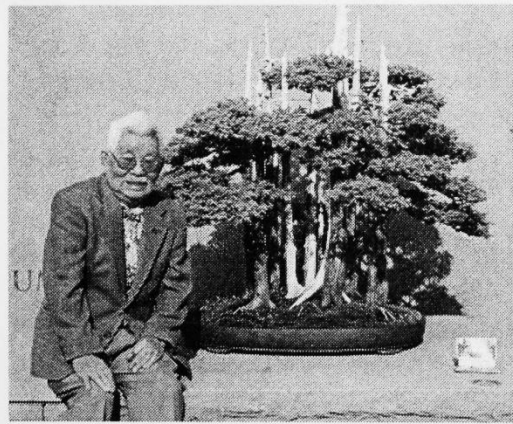
[Excerpt adapted from the NEA National Heritage Fellowships]

John Naka first visit to the state was at Michigan State University's Horticulture Bldg. on May 11, 1976, hosted by the Bonsai Society of Michigan, where he lectured and demonstrated on developing a grove planting using deciduous trees. Jack Wikle attended that meeting.

John was one of the first real outside bonsai presenters for that club. Jack was familiar with John by his reputation as a well-respected bonsai artist and super communicator. As John was asking questions to learn more about Michigan and its weather, Jack told him that in early April it could be 80 degrees and then, in a day or two, down to freezing. Then, he suggested casually, "Since you are from Los Angeles, growing bonsai has to be more difficult for us than for you since you don't have our weather extremes." John looked away and then looked up and said to Jack, "You people have lots of excuses." That was Jack's first lesson from John. A lot of what we do is about attitude. John Naka continued to be a great influence on Jack and there are a number of very good Naka quotes he shares whenever appropriate. Such as, "Now you all know too much is too much and (a pause) not enough is not enough and (pause) just right is just right". Jack learned from that quote that bonsai culture is about balance and that quote says it all.

John Naka

- * Japanese/American 1914 - 2004
- * Began career in Colorado then moved to Los Angeles
- * Started landscape business in L. A.
- * John's talents were not just his strong artistic sense and his horticultural expertise in growing healthy trees, more than anything else, he was a gifted communicator.
- * Elevated public perception of bonsai as an art form rather than a novelty.



Currently the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum facilities are being renovated to accommodate and comply with ADA handicap code compliance requirements.

Ann Arbor Bonsai Society thanks Jack Sustic for his excellent and informative presentation to the club.

Jack Sustic, former Curator of the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum at the U.S. National Arboretum presented to AABS in January 2006. The image above is from the February 2006 Newsletter highlighting his presentation about the Naka Exhibit.

Jerry Meislik visited an exhibition featuring John Naka in Columbus in 1983. He compiled these notes:

1. Twin trees should be same material, hearty and different sizes.
2. Attention first to proper roots, base and trunk line. Arranged trees together to conceal any faults of the individual trees.
3. The thickness/length ratio should be the same for both trees (i.e., if 2" thick and 8" tall, then tree number two should be 1" thick and 4" tall.
4. Arrange the branches for both trees as if there is only one tree.
5. The lowest branch should be on the smaller tree and is 1/3 the height.
6. Trees should be as close to each other as possible (saw off roots in that way).
7. Aluminum wire is best easier to handle, can be unwound, but it is not as strong as copper.
8. Don't wire trees into the pot with hidden wires – when repotting the tree, you may forget and damage the tree.
9. If the bottom of the tree is dying, the branches at the bottom are not getting enough light. If the top of the tree is dying or the sides, the roots are injured.
10. Every tree must have an Apex either live or jin.
11. A tree never has too many jins -they can always be cut off.
12. Wire is always too small - never too big.
13. Wire jin while soft and fresh to correct position.
14. Never debark a tree into the soil level it will rot right away.
15. When wiring branches on the tree, all branches usually have the same angle. If one main heavy branch can't be brought down, then it may be possible to bring all other branches up to its level.
16. Eliminate branches that cross over the trunks – all branches should radiate out.
17. If an upper branch is too thick, jin it and then thin it down or it can be kept alive but trimmed and with time, it will thin relative to other branches.



Naka's masterpiece Goshin is on display at the United States National Arboretum.

A few years later, Bruce Baker arranged for John to visit the area again. This time it was the Bonsai Association of Michigan Convention held at the Campus Inn on June 21 and 22. Several members of the AABS also belonged to this organization which included members from the southeastern Michigan clubs. The demo and lectures took place on the mezzanine featuring John Naka and Jack Wikle. Convention and exhibition registration included both lecture and demonstrations, John Naka's critique, and entrance to the vendor and exhibition areas.

Previous issues of this publication are located in the [History section of the AABS website](#)

NEXT WEEK: In Appreciation of Jerry and Rhona Meislik

HOW YOU CAN HELP WITH OUR 50TH CELEBRATION

1. To help us in this celebration effort, all Ann Arbor Bonsai Society members present and past, and all others wishing to contribute are invited to submit personal statements (60 words or less) to be published in our Yearbook. Each text contributor is also strongly encouraged to submit a favorite photo (with caption) of a bonsai tree or a bonsai activity to accompany his or her personal statement. (We can scan old prints or digitize color slides for anyone needing this help with old pictures.) [Upload Form is here](#)
2. Let's all Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the AABS in style with shirts that have our commemorative logo printed on the front. Shirts will be available for purchase for \$20 each at our monthly meetings, at the Annual Club Show August 29-30, and at The Flower Market in Dundee, Michigan.



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