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## Nick Lenz: Bonsai from the Wild

*By Bob Bauer*

A year ago I had no idea who Nick Lenz was. Then I read a Facebook post from Young Choe about an upcoming exhibit at the National Arboretum featuring Nick. The poster was intriguing so I checked it out. Wow! His trees were like no others that I've seen. And I said to myself "this guy is out there!"

**"There is always music going on in my head. Trees can't sing but they can dance, or at least be captured in a snapshot during the dance, or hurrying away from somewhere, or sauntering by the beach, or getting ready to sit down, or just stretching after a large belch. Motion is the key and ideal of my styling. A bonsai is not something sanguine, stupidly frozen in time and space..., but a thing in motion, a being, a human being or beast doing something..."**

*From Bonsai Today interview with Nick Lenz, 2003*

Andrew N. Lenz (Nick) of Leverett, MA was born in 1940. He received a B.A. in fresh water ecology from Stanford University and a M.A. from the University of Wisconsin, then changed directions and embarked on a career in colonial restoration. At about the same time, he also was beginning a second career, a passionate pursuit of bonsai and ceramic arts and becoming a collector of trees native to his northeastern forests.

Nick was a self-proclaimed "crazy old hermit" living in the rural areas of western Massachusetts. Yet he still enjoyed getting out and around in the bonsai community to share his knowledge. This eventually included a visit to our Ann Arbor Bonsai Society in May 1995. He did a presentation on Wednesday night, June 28, with small workshops the night before and the night after. From the newsletter announcing that meeting. "Nick is an interesting person (he would say character or even caricature) and this should be entertaining as well as very informative."



*Eastern Larch from the Cornell Bonsai Symposium, 1978.*

*Photo by Jack Wikle*

A couple of years later, in 1997, Nick's first, *Bonsai from the Wild* book was published by the American Bonsai Society. This was Nick's initial guide to collecting, styling and caring for bonsai, which was to become a definitive guide for collecting larch, white cedar, junipers, pines, wild apples and experimenting with many more species; even including his suggestions for collecting poison ivy. A second edition of *Bonsai from the Wild*, greatly expanded with much new text and many new photos was published by Stone Lantern Publishing in 2006.

When I shared my discovery with my fellow volunteers at Hidden Lake Gardens, I was surprised to find out Jack Wikle and Nick had been friends for many years. Jack told me,

*"I'd known of Nick from his writings in the American Bonsai Society's Journal before I ever met him. Then in 1981, I had the opportunity to join an American Bonsai Society (ABS) study group at a "camp," a summer home, in New Hampshire. The camp was on beautiful Squam Lake. Nick Lenz was basically the featured artist and the leader of this small ABS study group."*



***Nick at his home after the ABS Bonsai Symposium workshop in 1981.  
Photo by Jack Wikle***

That was how Jack met Nick and it was the beginning of a long friendship. Nick invited Jack to visit his home on his return trip to Michigan and to see the trees he was working with there. Following that experience, Jack decided to organize a similar kind of learning opportunity by inviting Nick to his home in Tecumseh Over Labor Day weekend to work with a few of the people in this area, who were most deeply involved in doing bonsai at that time.

While there, Nick stayed with Jack and Jeannine as a house guest. And then, ultimately, when he came back to do the 1995 program for the club, he ended up staying with the Wikle's again part of the time he was here.

Clearly one of Nick's strongest memories from his first visit was the huge clump of rhubarb growing in the Wikle's backyard at that time and Jeannine's rhubarb cake. Jack recalls

*"A few years later, after his stay with the Wikle's, when he was to be one of the featured artists at the American Bonsai Society's annual convention hosted in Montreal in 1988, Nick suggested it would be nice if Jeannine could bring him rhubarb cake. Jeannine didn't know whether he really expected her to do that or not, but she did take a cake for him and told him he didn't need to return the pan. Well, he mailed the pan back to her with one of his very nice handmade bonsai pots cushioned inside it."*

When I sat down with Jack one morning. He was eager to share his experiences and observations about Nick Lenz and his approach to bonsai art. In Jack's words:

*There were some very strong patterns, I think, to what Nick did:*

- *He was one of those artists who was marching to the beat of his own drum. He had absolutely no compulsion to follow other people's recipes. You know, he was doing Nick Lenz.*
- *One characteristic of Nick's work was kind of a determination to be dramatic. He was always making a strong statement. That is, it was overstatement, even exaggeration, in order to achieve the image he wanted to project.*
- *A large part of Nick's effort was in actively prospecting for very dramatic material and using that in his bonsai. He was well known for his trips up to Nova Scotia going to places where there wasn't much else other than struggling larch surviving.*
- *He also collected trees from old pastures and from abandoned orchards where seedlings had grown into smaller trees with a lot of personality, kept small by heavy livestock and deer browsing.*
- *Curiously, Nick also liked to work with species we don't often see as bonsai including: bittersweet, buckthorn, blueberry, barberry, shrubby dogwoods, cotoneaster, and even poison ivy.*
- *He was often trying to make a scene that represented something more than a single tree. There was a tree there but there were other things or suggestions of something more. Much of this work was overstatement, a wave for attention.*
- *A high percentage of Nick's bonsai displayed exposed roots in an expressive manner.*
- *He often used an exaggerated sense of flow or movement in his work that was very determined. There's nothing sedate about many of his trees, if cascading it was strongly cascading.*
- *He installed branches and other attachments where he needed them. The one thing that I remember about his demonstration here for our club was that he came with a box of dead branches. Just drill a hole in the trunk small enough for a tight fit and force this prosthesis into that drilled hole. In some cases, he was adding deadwood to the existing deadwood of the tree.*



O.K., so I decided to make a day trip to the National Arboretum. It was actually my second trip there, so I could spend all of my time drinking in the Nick Lenz exhibition. It was a glorious sunny fall day and I think I photographed every tree and placard the exhibit offered. I suspect there was a reason why the Arboretum decided to host this exhibit around Halloween. While some of Nick's work is very sensual, some is pretty scary.



*Penelope (left), American Larch from a private collection in Toronto, and Demon Cedar (right) Northern White-Cedar from the Pacific Bonsai Museum are two of Lenz's most notable works at the National Arboretum Exhibition. Photos by Bob Bauer.*

As a fledgling bonsai artist, I really enjoyed that day in the fall of 2019. It was a great presentation of Nick's trees and his pottery. That all of the separate owners of his trees would drive or ship his trees to the Arboretum for this national exhibition really shows how much people respect him and want to share his heritage. It was wonderful to actually see and connect to Nick's trees on an emotional level. Ultimately it was a very liberating experience. It was like Nick gave me his permission to do my thing - - - to experiment and try things that aren't the norm.

For a gallery of Nick's trees visit: <http://artofbonsai.org/galleries/lenz.php>

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

**NEXT WEEK: Kurt Smith: The Flower Dude**

## 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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