

## Kurt Smith: The Flower Dude

*By: Chris Kehrig*

One of my favorite drives is to the Flower Market in Dundee MI. Normally, a place with flowers is not my first choice, but there is something really special about the Flower Market, BONSAI TREES! There is a nice mix between indoor or tropical trees that are kept inside the greenhouse and outdoor trees that are hardy to stay outside most of the year. Such a special place must have a special owner and it does, Kurt Smith otherwise known as the Flower Dude. I was curious how Kurt got started in Bonsai and to learn more about him.



*Recent photo of Kurt with his first tree that he purchased at an AABS auction in 1986.*

*Photo by Lita Smith.*

Kurt attended Michigan State and studied horticulture in the early 80s. A friend of his during this time started with a Juniper bonsai on top of his TV which quickly died. He sought out Kurt for his input and thus started Kurt down the Bonsai path. Keeping outdoor trees inside is a popular misconception that people have about Bonsai.

Inspirations for Bonsai have been Jack Wikle, Jerry Meislik, and Bruce Baker with the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society (AABS). All have been very willing to share their findings and wisdom of many collected years of experience in Bonsai.

Membership in the bonsai society has been more than just trees. A lot of good friends have been made along with great timely advice. He has also been head of the AABS Bonsai show for many years.

Many newbies to Bonsai think that wiring or root trimming is the most important thing to learn in Bonsai, but Kurt disagrees. The number one rule he teaches to beginners is to water when needed and not on a schedule. If it needs water, give it water, if not, don't. He looks at the color of the soil to determine if a tree needs water. If the soil is dark in color then it does not need water, but if light, time to water. Kurt uses a volcanic heavy soil started from Jack Wikle that drains well and does help with not saturating the trees. He played around with different mixes over the years, but uses his current mix due to being readily available, economical, and good for his entire collection.

His earliest tree was a narrow leaf Ficus that he purchased for \$5 from Jerry at the auction approximately 34 years ago. While the tree is not perfect, it brings Kurt great pride that he has kept it going for all this time.

One thing about Kurt that may not be known is that he started with inside, tropical bonsai, when he was approached by Bruce Baker about an outdoor Yew next to his 100 year old house. Bruce dug the old yew up and created a wonderful Bonsai out of it which is now in the Matthaei collection. Kurt wishes he would have seen the potential in it, but is glad it's in the collection.

Bonsai is the next step into an evolving passion in horticulture. What keeps people coming is the challenge and artistry of Bonsai. There is always a new tree to take on or a new way to approach.

Kurt started his shop with some indoor trees from his personal collection. Tom Truman was also instrumental in the early 90s at getting Kurt onboard. Tom's shop was in Mt. Clemens and they would go on buying sprees together. Kurt bought out his stands and inventory when he closed up shop.

Some newcomers to Bonsai are people that come in for flowers and discover the bonsai. They have no idea and ask about them since never seeing them before. Also, some newbies discover Kurt's Bonsai at shows with a heavy focus on indoor trees. He recommends the Portulacaria, which is similar to a Jade, but has much smaller foliage. Ficus, also fairly forgiving, are popular with beginners as well. Outdoor has more of the hobbyists, but Juniper are the most common with many remembering Karate Kid's Mr. Miyagi styling them in the movie.



*Kurt participating in a workshop during the 2010 AABS Annual Show. Photo by Jay Sinclair.*

A recommendation for newcomers and experienced Bonsai artists as well is to attend the Flower Market Bonsai open house the first Saturday of the month. There, many bonsai enthusiasts gather to work on and discuss a multitude of trees brought in. Often, food is brought in and some stay for hours to gain as much knowledge as possible while catching up with old / new friends.

The retail side of the shop has an impressive range of prices from ~\$10 for a basic starter tree to some well above \$1,000 which makes it an excellent stop for newbies as well as seasoned Bonsai folks. There is also a multitude of supplies such as pots, fertilizers, and anything needed to either get people started or staying in the hobby.

While the Virus has the shop closed, they are still busy prepping the trees. Mostly all of the outdoor repotting and trimming is going on. Also, working the beds with lots of trees coming out of the beds and into pots while trimming the ones left in the beds. Kurt is still working a full day along with his right hand man Razzi.

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

### **NEXT WEEK: Paul Kulesa: Building a Strong Foundation**

#### **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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