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Cyril Grum: Dedicated Bonsai Artist

By *Trudy Bulkley*

Cyril Grum has been a member of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society, AABS, for almost two-thirds of its fifty-year existence. Cyril is a wonderfully modest individual, with great curiosity, enthusiasm, generosity, and talent. Yes, he was a beginner once. He still has his first tree, a boxwood, from a first class, one designed to introduce beginners to the art of bonsai. From that initial class in 1992, Cyril has grown into a nationally recognized artist whose trees are enjoyed, certainly in his hometown of Ann Arbor, but also throughout the world. A quote from John Naka that appeared in Issue # 10 of “Roots and Branches” applies to Cyril’s attitude toward his now long-standing avocation:

“What I like about bonsai is that it has a beginning, but no end . . . 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.”

That first class that Cyril and his wife Cathy took was given at the University of Michigan’s Matthaei Botanical Gardens in 1992. Jack Wikle and Connie Bailie Crancer taught the class. Cyril was hooked! He had found a new pastime, one more congenial to his young family circumstances. Not reluctantly, but realistically, Cyril

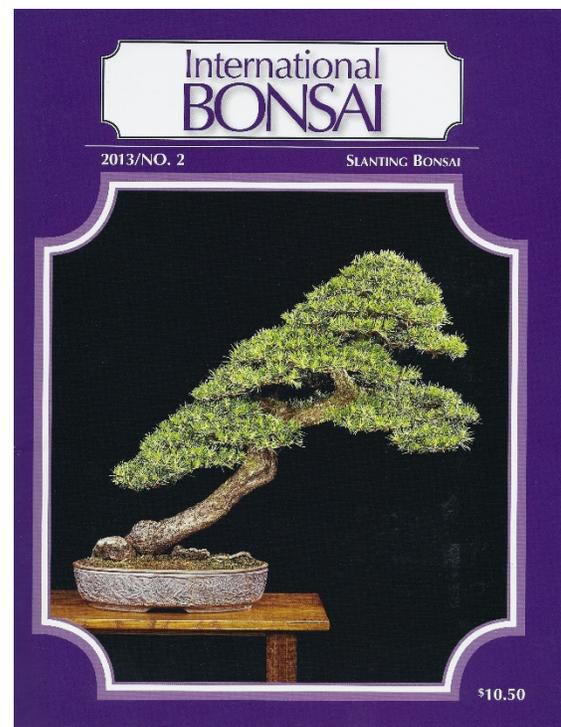


Jack and Cyril working on the oak tree.

gave up the challenging pastime of racing large sailboats on the Great Lakes. His second child, son Mark, had just arrived and one parent's absence, sailing every weekend for the summer and fall, no longer worked. Cyril is still an enthusiastic sailor but, happily, weekends began to be spent at home, filled with family and bonsai.

Always interested in and a lover of nature and trees, Cyril found the instructors in this beginning class superb and a real inspiration. Jack Wikle in particular helped and has continued to help and inspire Cyril over the years. Jack's approach to the art of bonsai was grounded in sharing. The class provided a sound introduction to the thought processes that can be brought to bear on looking at a woody plant that is soon to become a bonsai, your bonsai. Artistic and horticultural considerations were shared, and everyone's opinions and experiences were valued. Self awareness was encouraged and grew as readily as the trees in containers, with opportunities for growth, learning, quandaries, and disappointments, as well as temporary solutions and patience. Over the years Jack Wikle has continued as mentor and friend. Cyril feels deeply indebted to Jack as a wonderfully enabling individual whose steady insights have enhanced immeasurably his human as well as bonsai values and judgments.

Cyril's collection grew rapidly from that single boxwood to a great variety of trees and challenges, as well as acclaim. He is an active member of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society and exhibits regularly in its annual shows. His trees have been recipients of many votes in "Vote for Your Favorite Tree" balloting by visitors to the show. He shows and shares his trees at even larger venues: the annual Art of Bonsai show at Michigan State University's Hidden Lake Gardens in Tipton, Michigan; the Michigan All State Show at Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids; and the biennial invitational U.S. National Bonsai Exhibition in Rochester, NY. In addition to recognition and awards at these events, his Scot's pine appeared on the cover of International Bonsai, Vol. 35, No.2, in 2013. As far as



this viewer is concerned, this tree especially reflects the deep appreciation for the artistry and power of the natural world that Cyril captures in his bonsai. More recently, Cyril wrote an article with Jack Wikle as co-author, This Happened to an English Oak published in *Bonsai: Journal of the American Bonsai Society*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2018.

For the last ten years Cyril has worked with Marco Invernizzi, a young (b. 1975) Italian bonsai artist and design consultant who served as an apprentice for four years with very highly regarded Japanese bonsai artist Masahiko Kimura. Marco tours internationally giving bonsai workshops and demonstrations. He's come to Ann Arbor to present to the AABS. He visits Cyril's collection annually to advise and critique, with wit, a keen eye and skilled hands and a boldness that has pushed Cyril to develop his personal art. Both artists enjoy the relationship.



Repotting yew tree: Jack, Cyril and Marco

Characteristically, Cyril appreciates and acknowledges the strengths gained from the many people who have made presentations to the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society, both Society members and guest artists. Among the visiting artists, he particularly admires the teaching style of David De Groot, now retired but longtime Curator of the Pacific Rim Bonsai Collection, now the Pacific Bonsai Museum, in Federal Way, Washington, and considers his *Basic Bonsai Design* one of best manuals available. For Cyril, the hallmark of a good teacher is someone who can communicate on a level where everyone understands.

Cyril, too, demonstrates that capacity in the presentations and workshops that he has done for the AABS. The Society has proved to be a wonderful place for learning, for an exchange of ideas as well as for the camaraderie found at its gatherings. The advice that Cyril, now a seasoned and respected bonsai artist, offers to anyone just starting out is simple. Do it. Get more than one tree, go to a nursery, pick something up and try it. Do read, but also go to classes and workshops. Just get started. In addition to his availability to answer questions or offer encouragement at AABS meetings, Cyril also serves as a volunteer at the University of Michigan's Matthaei Botanical Gardens, learning with others and helping maintain the trees in their outstanding collection.



Trees from Cyril's personal collection (Left-right) Oak, White Birch clump and a Yew display from a national show.

Cyril's personal collection is equally outstanding and reflects his passion for bonsai. There are more than many trees in all stages of development. Among the breathtakingly beautiful ones, long established and honorably displayed, are: Scots pine, hinoki cypress, shimpaku juniper, larch, golden larch forest, Japanese white pine, trident maple, crabapple, ginkgo, Korean hornbeam forest, boxwood, cotoneaster, bald cypress, dawn redwood and many others. Beyond these more traditional bonsai subjects, there is a robust English oak and a graceful threesome of birch trees, each grown in their respective harmonious pots. As to which tree might have challenged him the most, Cyril states simply that they are all challenging at different stages and in different seasons. There can be times, for multiple reasons, that a tree is growing well and you can feel like a true partner to nature creating something imaginative and pleasing, as if it were all simply meant to grow that way in the natural world and endure. Other times, for multiple reasons, there are problems that have to be pushed through. The struggling tree, when you are working on it, presents a vexing opportunity for learning and engagement. One of the highlights of what has become a substantial avocation for Cyril Grum

happened in March of 2015. An account of that special time will appear in another issue of "Roots & Branches."

When asked what has kept him pursuing his bonsai pastime so creatively over so many years, Cyril responds that it offers a change from his daily work, an escape and a respite. If we were to share the nature of Cyril's day job, this article would be at least twice as long. It would be full of impressive accomplishments and contributions, all carried out with modesty, generosity, enthusiasm, talent and keen caring. He is Senior Associate Chair for Undergraduate Medical Education and Professor in the Department of Internal Medicine at the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor. He is a valued doctor in Pulmonary and Critical Care at Michigan Medicine.



Scots Pine, Cyril and #1 assistant, Cathy

This article is being written in early April 2020, right in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, an unprecedented global human health crisis that is upending all our lives. Cyril is today hard at work, caring for others at University Hospital. "Keep safe and keep well" have become daily watchwords for many of us as we "shelter in place," our minimal contribution to fighting this new and deadly virus. To Cyril Grum, M.D. and his family, we say thank you for all you have done and are doing in this critical time.

Cyril, we are so glad you switched pastimes back in 1992. The Ann Arbor Bonsai Society thanks you for sharing your bonsai adventures with us.

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

NEXT WEEK: *Jay Sinclair: Balancing the Technical and the Aesthetics*

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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