

Jay Sinclair: Balancing the Technical and the Aesthetic

By Don Wenzel

Jay Sinclair started out in bonsai like many of us, having an interest in the hobby, picking up a tree on his own, trying to take care of it, but not having much success. Realizing some expertise would likely be helpful, he sought out the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society. At the first meeting he attended, members provided him with some cuttings, which he took home, and as he put it, "They actually grew." After that, he became a fairly regular attendee.

Since that time, Jay has become a fixture of the club, having been a member of the AABS in the neighborhood of thirty years. His past positions have included Show Chair and President. You will find him involved in making sure things run smoothly at most AABS events, whether it be seeing to the audio/visual needs of the monthly speaker or helping out at the annual show by doing a workshop. Jay is also a dedicated volunteer at both Hidden Lake Gardens and Matthaei Botanical Gardens; working on their bonsai collections.



Jay with Jack Wikle. Photo by Michael Field.

Currently he is the AABS program chair, reaching out to notable bonsai resources, scheduling, and making the arrangements for the club's monthly speakers. In some cases, this has given him the opportunity to get to know speakers better. A few of his favorites are David DeGroot, Jack Wikle, Jerry Meislik, and Bjorn Bjorholm, all of whom bring a wealth of knowledge to the craft of bonsai. Having been able to work with them while volunteering and in workshops provided Jay the opportunity to learn a lot from them. Young Choe has also been a particular pleasure, opening up the world of Kusamono to our members and Jay is happy to have been a part of making that happen. Jay comments, "Her enthusiasm and encyclopedic knowledge of native plants made working with her a lot of fun."

When asked who he'd like to get as upcoming speakers/presenters, Jay alluded to the fact that it's not always easy. Things like conflicting schedules, lack of communication due to very busy schedules and cost issues all contribute to quite a juggling act at times. This year, of course, the entire schedule is in disarray as a result of the Corona virus. That said, there are a few that come to mind – Todd Schlafer, Owen Reich, Ryan Neil, Rodney Clemons, Dean Bull, and Andy Smith. These all represent people with unique skills and perspectives to bonsai. It has been something of a disappointment that Suthin Sukosolvisit will not be able to make it this year as hoped. Jay will be looking at the possibility of making that visit happen sometime in the future.

Speaking in general about his experience in the AABS, Jay has found it to be a great experience. He has found one of the greatest benefits is just the people themselves. The opportunity to get to know some really good, helpful, and, generous people; generous with their knowledge, generous with their time. Some of the relationships he has developed with people in the group over the years have been very rewarding and also led to the opportunity to want to learn from them. People like Jack Wikle, Cyril Grum, Paul Kulesa, Carmen Leskoviansky are just a few that came to mind for Jay, among the many he has met along the way.



Kurt Smith, Jay, Jack Wikle, Michael Field, and Ron Milostan at the Flower Market in Dundee, Michigan.

Jay will tell you that his journey in bonsai has been inspired by many great people, but for him, the one seminal figure is Jack Wikle. As he says, "The one that stands out and I'm sure that this is true for many of the people in our group is Jack Wikle. He's just been an amazing inspiration and mentor over the years." Jack has been a presence throughout Jay's bonsai experience, and they've worked together closely for most of the last 20 years. As Jay puts it, "I have had the good fortune to spend a lot of time with Jack in recent years. We have gone to shows and events together, and have worked together at both Matthaei and Hidden Lake Gardens." In 2018 Jay accompanied Jack and Jeannine to the National Bonsai Exhibition in Rochester, New York. It was Jay's first time to this particular show and it was a memorable experience, all the more so because of sharing it with them.

One memory of Jack's bonsai knowledge that Jay relates – "I had a Tsukomo False Cypress that I had gotten at a workshop. Nice tree, with a lot of potential, but it started having mysterious dieback, a branch at a time. I had no idea what was going on, and took it to Jack. We repotted it, added some agricultural sulfur and he gave me some advice. The change was astonishing. Within a week, it had better color and recovered to become a very nice tree. I would tease him about how he had laid hands on it and miraculously cured it. Sadly, a couple years ago, it started having the same issue. I did the same things that Jack had prescribed before, but this time it did not recover. I guess I should have had him lay hands on it again."

There have been other hobbies and interests that Jay has been involved with before, and during, his extensive time with bonsai. Early on, Jay thought photography might become his vocation. That turned out not to be the case, but he is one of the most ardent photographers in the club, making it a point to capture the trees in the AABS show every year. Amateur astronomy has also been an enduring interest. During his early years in bonsai Jay also found the time to get pretty involved in unicycling. It was an activity his daughter was interested in, so instead of watching from the sidelines he decided to take part. Over a period of 15 years, Jay participated in national unicycling conventions, visiting locales around the country, getting to know some great people in the process. As to what it was like, Jay put it this way, "NAUCC (North American Unicycling Championships and Convention) is kind of like a big reunion of a really eccentric family. A very eclectic group of people, from all walks of life, and a wide range of points of view. It was always exhausting and a lot of fun. We travelled to places that we might never have gotten to otherwise and got in a lot of side travel along the way."



The Redford Township Unicycle Club participating in the Club Routine competition at the National Unicycling Championships and Convention (NAUCC) at Salt Lake City in 2004.

Unicycle competitions run the gamut, from track and field events – racing, long and high jump and so forth, as well as off road events, x-game style obstacle courses and street skill events and even artistic competitions with choreographed routines. Then there is unicycle basketball and hockey. A national convention would include all of this as well as workshops, group rides, socializing and a popular unofficial event – flaming puck unicycle hockey. You can get a glimpse of that [here](#). One of the group's main activities was participating en masse in parades. They took part in the Detroit Thanksgiving Day parade as well as many others.

Jay pursued a career in teaching, having been a middle school Earth Science teacher for 25 years; retiring 4 years ago. This has given him more time to work on his bonsai, as well as the bonsai of the collections for which he volunteers. He has found that volunteering has been a great way to improve his skills and knowledge.



Jay with a telescope he built in the '90s. Photo from 2006.

Jay has found his background in science and his longstanding interest in photography to be helpful aspects to his bonsai practice. In Jay's words, "The connection between the science and the art of bonsai, you know they are certainly both involved. There's horticulture, and then there's the whole aesthetic component to bonsai – and that's a combination that appeals to me. Even going back to, you know, my earliest professional ambitions ... to be a professional photographer – and that was of course back in the days of film and darkrooms.... Again, I enjoyed that interplay between the technical aspects and the aesthetic aspects of the art form, and that just seems to be kind of a recurring theme in my life."

When asked what it is about bonsai that keeps people interested, engaged and sticking with it, Jay circled around to his time with photography and the key difference in the hobbies for him. Paraphrasing here –

“One of the things with photography as a hobby is, ... I’ve invested all this money in equipment and time and getting these wonderful pictures. Now that I’ve got these great pictures, what do I do with them? There’s only so many you can hang on the wall. I can’t just sit around and look at pictures all day, but I can interact with my trees every day. Even if it’s only for a few minutes, and I think that’s important. Sometimes I just walk out there and look at them and just hang out and enjoy them for a few minutes.

And that can be valuable. But the other thing is the engagement is ongoing. You know, you’re never done as long as the tree is still living. You’re not done. And there’s always something to do. Going along with that, there’s always something new. You can learn about a new species to try, new techniques to try, learning more about maintaining the trees’ health. Learning more about the history of aesthetics – the learning curve is infinite. It never ends.

A good example of that, again, going back to our mentor, Jack Wikle. You know, he’s been doing this longer than anybody in the AABS. For many years, yet he is still asking questions and learning and taking notes. He’s never given up on climbing that learning curve. He’s still doing it, and that is inspiring as well.”

When asked how he’s doing in this time of social distancing, Jay commented that it hasn’t been too much of an issue. For him, it hasn’t been too great a departure from his normal routine. Of course, he would like to be able to see people, but so far it has not posed any real issues for him. Bonsai has been helping. He’s repotted trees that have been sitting around on his bench and in nursery pots for years. It’s felt good to get some of those things done. He plans to continue in that vein. “It’s kind of nice to just be able to say, OK. There’s not a lot else pushing at me right now, I’m not going to meetings. I’m not going to work. I can work on the trees and not feel too much like, oh, there’s all these other things I should be doing.”

Finally, as to what makes hanging out with your trees so appealing – “It is just a few quiet minutes – to get away from stress, etc. I can look at them, think about what needs to be done, or what could be done to make them better. It’s also a chance to just enjoy them.”

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

NEXT WEEK: *The Annual Show: A Photo Essay*

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.



Ann Arbor Bonsai Society
aabonsaisociety@gmail.com
<http://www.annarborbonsaisociety.org>