



Roots & Branches

The Origins and Directions of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society

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Bill Struhar: Storyteller, Raffle and Tree Guy

By Bob Bauer



"A buck a piece, or 6 for \$5.00". Photo by Jay Sinclair.

Bill Struhar placed 4 trees in the top ten at the recent Virtual 2020 Michigan All State Bonsai Show including Best of Show. Quite an accomplishment. So I sat down with Bill to learn the secrets to his success. Bill has a very calm cadence and by the end I felt like Grasshopper, under a tree learning from the master. He has a great way of spinning a yarn if you ever get the chance to sit down and chat with him. Bill, master gardener, has been a regular at every meeting and annual show promoting the club and raising money. In his spare time, he takes care of his trees and gardens.

Bill told me about a fellow gardener friend from down the block who always looked in the Detroit News Thursday Section where they had club announcements and what's going on during the weekend. He found the Hosta Society, which they both joined in 1997. "I've always been known as a tree guy in gardening, so we kept looking". In '99 they found the Four Seasons Bonsai Club. They were still meeting at Cranbrook at the time and that first meeting was all it took! Bill joined immediately.

There is an interesting story behind Bill's first tree. "I had bought a new house in 1973 with nothing but a big sandlot. There was nothing on it after the bulldozers left except the house. I was starting from scratch. I used to see the eastern red cedars along the highway and they always looked interesting to me. I stopped one day and dug one up. I had a little plastic bonsai pot that I got from somewhere and I potted it. I took it in the house like every idiot does with a juniper and sometime in November the tree was not looking happy. So I took it back outside and put it in the flower bed alongside the house. And it's still there today. It's about 18 inches in diameter and about 35 or 40 feet tall and it's still alive. So today I can say I didn't kill my first bonsai."

When asked about early influencers, Bill mentioned Marvin Fields. "Marvin had been doing it for a very long time and he had a whole slew of very beautiful plants. He had his typical azaleas that had been in bonsai for 20 years and he also had a red leaved smoke tree. He brought it to the show once. And it was a perfect mound, not a helmet, but just a nice, perfect mound. And it was in full flower with the sprays sticking up. And that was one of the most impressive plants from the early days.

"Marvin, like most old guys into bonsai are very willing to share with anybody who will sit still long enough. And I was thirsty for knowledge. I know a lot about gardening, I've been a master gardener since 78, but I knew absolutely nothing about bonsai. And everybody that I meet that is new to bonsai, I go out of my way to try to tell them you need to find a local club and join it because there is no substitute for being able to pick up the phone when you have a problem and say, Fred, I have this problem, what do I do? And Fred says to do so and so and so. And in one minute flash you can hang up the phone and continue on with business."

Bill began going to Ann Arbor Bonsai Society meetings in 2006. He had been the show chair at the Four Seasons for five years, so he was ‘knee deep into Bonsai’ and just wanted to see what was going on in Ann Arbor. “I didn’t go to a lot of meetings, but then over the years, it became clear that Ann Arbor club was more my cup of tea. And I made a choice. And that has worked out fine for me.



*Information display and club literature handed out from 2006 thru 2019.
Photo by Bill Struhar.*

“I remember attending a workshop for the new kids. Everyone got a juniper, and the old kids would coach them. Marvin Fields and Ray Feldman, another old timer from Four Season who had a lot of beautiful trees, were two of the old kids. Both sat down with me for some lucky reason and as I stepped through doing this and that, they would chime in. And then Marvin would say, well, you can do this and this and this. And Ray said, yeah, and you can or you could do this and this and this. And that went on for an hour and a half or two hours. And the tree came out very nice. But what I really learned from that, more than anything is that no matter what you’re looking at, no matter what you want to do, there’s more than one way to do it. So you’re not compelled to take a juniper and put that first branch on the left a little and short, then the corresponding number two on the right, has to be longer and a little a little more downwind, so to speak.

“You can do it a million ways. But you have to have the confidence to know that the guys who have the beautiful trees and who have been doing it for some time, they don’t feel compelled to do it any particular way. It just

depends on the particular tree in a particular situation at some moment in time. So that gave me the confidence to go ahead and make dumb moves. And sometimes I made some good moves. And over time, you learn that there's a lot of beautiful trees within that one single tree.

"I do like to attend the workshops, and I'm one of the few people who will pay a few bucks to just go there and sit and listen while the instruction is going on. The more people you are exposed to, you know, you pick up a little tidbit here and there. For instance, I was in workshop with Jim Doyle five years ago down at the Flower Market. The workshop tree was a little too tall and I didn't know where to start. And I was really stumped by this one. Jim Doyle sat down and he said, 'What's the best feature of this tree?' And there was a longer conversation following that gave me the beginning shot with this tree. And everything that you do following that is to accentuate the positive of that best feature. And that makes it a whole lot easier to work on a tree.

"At one time, I supervised 350 people and with that you need some time alone, where you can just coast. In the olden days before bonsai I used to fish out of a canoe for 40 years. I would go out at dawn and I would come in before it was too dark to see where I was going. And spend twelve or thirteen hours out there and come home exhausted. I never spoke to anybody. You catch fish or you don't catch fish. But solitude is necessary part of my life. And it has continued that even now that I'm retired.

"I have a Bridgeport milling machine in my garage and a giant bandsaw. And I love to work with my hands until I die. So this is just another way of keeping busy at my own speed and making beautiful plants is part of it, too."

And Bill has been making beautiful trees for years and has always been recognized for his craft. I asked Bill how he had so many great trees.

"Tenacity is part of it. You have to just keep at it for years and years. And if you're doing it right, you're supposed to get better year after year of the year. And that's a very satisfying part of working with things that can live a long time. That Larch Forest is case in point [referring to the larch forest that was the People's Choice Award winner at this year's Virtual Michigan All-State Bonsai Show]. Those trees were given to me by George Randall in 2003, and he gave me some preliminary detailed instructions on the composition.



The Larch Forest was the People's Choice Award winner at the 2020 Virtual Michigan All-State Bonsai Show. George Randall collected the trees in 1995 in northern Michigan and gave them to Bill in 2003. It was later tweaked by Ray Nagatoshi in 2008. Photos by Bill Struhar

“And I put it together and something happened in 2006, Roy Nagatoshi was judging the show at the Four Seasons. I was the clerk during the show and I would carry the clipboard and hand him the critique form. The judge would fill it out and hand it back to me and go to the next tree. When he got to my forest he stopped. He took about five minutes to make a very elaborate drawing, a plan, with a front view of the forest. And basically it was instructions on how to move a few trees in the composition. Moving those three trees changed the forest from a nice but clunky forest to that that golden triangle.”

“When I came to Ann Arbor, they didn't have a raffle going and I asked if they were interested in having one. I talked to Paul Kulesa about it with some caveats. He said I could do the raffle. But you have to give me a free hand to respond to what I see as the interest of the members. The idea was we'd do it to give people one more reason to come to the meetings. If we made money, you know, I would try to break even, but that's not the main goal. And the board said 'Here's two hundred dollars, buy some stuff. And when you run out of money, we'll give you some more money.'”

“I bought some wire. And it’s my opinion that you can’t do bonsai without wire and that a lot of new people, when they look at the price of wire at twenty-five dollars a spool for a kilogram of wire and you need five or six sizes. You’re talking about \$125 -150 worth of wire to start. And that can be hard to overcome. And so I thought there’s no reason why I can’t buy these bundles, break them down into 166 gram spools. So I get six out of a kilogram and put together a package. And I have packages at every raffle of six or seven kinds of wire. They’re different sizes and those almost always go real early in the picking.

“It was very important to me to be able to make this wire available to anybody for a buck, a chance. And that is really a wonderful thing. Very profitable for the club, and the members love it. You know, it’s when you get something in a raffle, it’s almost like it’s free. Right? The value is certainly much greater than what you paid for it. That’s for sure. I never had to go back for more money. We get many donations of great stuff from members, and the raffle is self-supporting.”



*Korean Hornbeam at original height in 2005 and in 2017 less than half as tall.
Photos by Bill Struhar.*

Thank you Bill for all of the beautiful trees you share with us and thank you for all the innovation and dedication that you have provided to Ann Arbor Bonsai Society. Your tireless efforts have helped bring financial strength and prestige to the club.

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

NEXT WEEK: 50 Years of Workshops: 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. We have a few shirts remaining which will be shipped upon ordering. Shirts are priced at \$20 which includes domestic shipping. The available colors and sizes (adult unisex) are listed below:*
- Medium: 7 black, 2 grey
 - Large: 3 black, 6 grey
 - X-large: 1 black, 3 grey
- Please Place Your [Order Here.](#)



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