

The Art and Nature of Carmen Leskoviansky

By Peggy Kubitz

I wonder how many bonsai enthusiasts grew up playing in the woods? What better way to foster a love of nature, plants, and trees? Carmen Leskoviansky grew up in Ortonville, Michigan with a garden, chickens, and woods to explore and play in. Every spring, her parents would allow her and her brother to pick out half a flat of annual flowers to plant in their own gardens. Perhaps, this was an early igniting of an interest in plants. Carmen's grandmother and brother were artists and her father was an artist and did some architecture. When it came time to decide on a major in college, both horticulture and art were considered, but horticulture became her true calling and major at Michigan State University. Later in life, the combination of art and nature that bonsai offers would be a blend of both passions.



Carmen seen here watering a Ficus benjamina forest, originally put together by Jerry Meislik, Connie Crancer-Bailey, and Matthaei volunteers. Photo by Jay Sinclair.

In 2009, Carmen secured a full- time position at Matthaei Botanical Gardens with the peony garden restoration project. With the proximity of the bonsai, she developed an awareness and appreciation of the collection. In the summer of 2011, purely by accident, she was assigned to manage the Matthaei collection. She also became a member of the AABS. At the time, she had little exposure to the nurturing of bonsai. However, Connie Bailey-Crancer was the curator, and she was confident Carmen would step up to the position. Although, at the time, Carmen was hesitant, she was willing. Connie was about to go to the Louisville, Kentucky symposium and Carmen was to accompany her. It seemed overwhelming at first. Sitting in a soil seminar, a presenter asked Carmen how long she had been doing bonsai. Much to his astonishment, she answered, "It's my first day!" However, it proved to be an enlightening experience. As is the usual case with bonsai enthusiasts, they are willing to share and extend to others their expertise and love of the art. With her perky, friendly personality she was able to connect with many professionals there, and the experience fueled her desire to develop her skill set with the bonsai, with intentions to take bonsai collection to the next level.



Carmen with Jack Wikle and Jack Sustic.

Fortunately, Carmen had a dedicated group of knowledgeable volunteers backing her up at Matthaei such as Bill Heston, Cyril Grum, Paul Kulesa, and Jay Sinclair. A year or so later, Jack Wikle, who has mentored so many, returned. As a result, Carmen continued to expand her interest in and expertise with bonsai. Some intense training came when David De Groot was brought in to assist with taking the collection to a more professional level. Carmen was involved in some significant learning and styling decisions. She also expanded her bonsai knowledge with the many excellent presenters and workshops the AABS hosts, including Young Choi, Julian Adams, and Dave De Groot. Eventually, she transitioned to doing her own presentations.

Recently, she has been studying with Michael Hagedorn in Oregon. This has been a two-year professional commitment. She says her trips to Oregon were amazing both for personal and professional development. “A lot of what we covered reaffirmed much of what I already knew which made me feel more confident in my abilities to care for the collection at MBG. However, there was also some unlearning to do. It has been a challenge to change some things I’ve been doing for almost 10 years, but in the end, it makes for healthier, more robust trees.



Dave De Groot is using a torch to bend some deadwood on a larch, which was heated with a torch, held by Cyril. Carmen is using tinfoil and spraying water to keep the foliage and live wood cool. Photo by Jay Sinclair.

"My cohorts consisted of me and two other students, and being able to work and learn together kept us all engaged in the work and provided mutual support for difficult tasks. I had the opportunity to practice a lot of techniques I had only heard about but never done, and I learned new methods for doing things.

"My experience in Portland directly translates to my work with the collection. Applying what I've learned has already begun to show results of healthier and more well-developed trees. It also has made me more excited about bonsai. Having the skills to do the work makes the work more fun and seeing what can be done opened my mind to all the things I want to do moving forward."

Carmen hasn't finished Michael's book *Bonsai Heresy* yet. "I'm about 1/3 of the way in, and there are many topics we covered in the seasonal courses. So, it's not a lot of new information for me. However, it's nice to have it written down for reference. Probably the most surprising thing I've read so far is the effect that DIF (day/night differential temperatures) has on tree health - this comes up in a discussion about why temperate trees struggle in warm or subtropical climates (think ponderosa in LA). I would highly recommend this book to everyone as it contains a lot of scientific basis for why we do what we do in bonsai and dispels a lot of common misconceptions."



Carmen with Melvyn Goldstein, donor, bonsai expert and collector of Satsuki azalea which he displays each year at Matthaei Botanical Gardens.

Carmen's favorite trees in the collection at Matthaei are the boxwood forest and the azaleas. The boxwood forest was given to her by Connie as a practice tree and she has grown attached to it, because she has worked on it so frequently with promising results. The azaleas require interaction and must be picked on regularly. She finds the junipers and pines more difficult to master, but has volunteers that enjoy them and that has been encouraging. Carmen loves that it is possible to develop a relationship with a tree while working in harmony with friends. She finds tending the bonsai to be meditative. The practice is peaceful, calming and focused in a way that allows one to be fully present. At first, her membership was an extension of her job, but now she loves the community involvement of the show and giving her own advice. She enjoys teaching, as well as learning from the programs and visiting artists. The AABS has acquired a valued member. Carmen has indeed lived up to Connie's relief in finding a replacement with both artistic talent and a horticulture background, inherently well suited to the winsome art of bonsai.

NEXT WEEK: *Twenty-Five Years Later: A Special Time For Cyril Grum*

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: 4 black, 2 grey
 - Large: 3 black, 4 grey
 - X-large: 1 black, 3 grey
- Please Place Your [Order Here.](#)



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aabonsaisociety@gmail.com
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