



# Roots & Branches

The Origins and Directions of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society

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## Jack Wikle, Cultivating Trees and Artists for Over 50 Years (Part 2)

By Diane Faust, Conservatory Manager, Hidden Lake Gardens

[The following is Part 2 of the Jack Wikle story, read [Part 1 here](#).]

Jack's resume includes an early public school teaching position, working seven years for The Davey Tree Expert Company as member of its Technical Service staff, and eventually his employment in 1968 as the first education specialist at Michigan State University's Hidden Lake Gardens.

Very early in his new employment, Jack was asked if he would like to display some of his bonsai at the Gardens and this sharing was the beginning of bonsai display there. A number of generous donations of bonsai to the Gardens collection, over the years, eventually allowed Jack to take his own trees back home.



*Jack with a group of the small bonsai he grows indoors year around relying completely on artificial light. The juniper highest on the stand had been growing indoors under Jack's care 30 years when photo was taken. Ann Arbor Bonsai Society, 2010 Annual Exhibit. Photo by Michael Field.*

Serving as Program Chairman for both the 1980 and 1985 American Bonsai Society Annual Symposia held at Michigan State University were early contributions by Jack to this national organization.

In 1989, after a bit over 20 years of service there, Jack retired from fulltime employment at Hidden Lake Gardens to pursue his own business of bonsai growing/design consultation, selling pots, trees, etc.

Among his other post-retirement activities, Jack served as Editor of Bonsai, the quarterly journal of the American Bonsai Society for four years (1988 through 1991).

He also taught five-week bonsai classes, twice yearly, in the Matthaei Botanical Gardens' Adult Education program for eight years, 1989 through 1996. Connie Bailie Crancer, Trudy Bulkley, Cyril Grum, and Tom Phardel stand out as class participants who went on to become active bonsai growers and active participants in our club.

And, beginning with the February 2002 issue of our AABS Newsletter, Jack contributed a "usually" monthly column he called "View from here," sharing his bonsai perceptions. This column continued almost five years concluding with the last "View" article, February 2006. [A number of Jack's View columns](#) can be found posted on our AABS website.

Jack is also known for being a pioneer in growing very small bonsai, indoors, year around, under fluorescent lights. His articles on this subject have appeared in print around the world (Britain, Denmark, Germany, India and Malayasia) in addition to his "One Grower's Tips for Success with Indoor Bonsai" published in the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens Handbook on Indoor Bonsai # 124, Autumn, 1990. Other Wikle articles on growing bonsai indoors under artificial light can be found posted today on several internet websites.

Jack has exhibited his trees in many bonsai shows here in the United States. A small group of his bonsai even appeared as a poster in the 10th International Bonsai and Suiseki Exhibition hosted in Osaka, Japan in 1989.

He has also written many articles on the subject of bonsai, and as a visiting artist given presentations for bonsai societies as far east as New York City and

Washington, DC; as far north and west as Seattle and Victoria, BC; and as far south as Houston and Corpus Christi, TX.

Since retiring from full-time work at Hidden Lake Gardens, Jack still has retained his position of curator of the bonsai collection at Hidden Lake Gardens as well as having served part-time as Curator of the Harper Dwarf and Rare Conifer Collection at the Gardens for 12 years.

Under Jack's leadership, The Hidden Lake Gardens bonsai collection has become one of the outstanding displays of public garden bonsai in Michigan with the help of the many dedicated volunteers who have come and gone through the years.

I started assisting Jack with the Gardens' bonsai sometime around year 2000. Although I had a horticulture degree, I had not been exposed to growing bonsai in my education. I did know Jack Wikle before I started working at Hidden Lake Gardens as the conservatory manager.

Our first contact came when I asked him to speak on bonsai at a horticulture club meeting when I was a student at MSU. Later, our MSU horticulture club came down to visit Hidden Lake Gardens and Jack was our guide.

Jack's wife, Jeannine must be mentioned because we all know that behind any great married man there must be a very supportive wife and she is one.

I have been fortunate to know Jack a very long time. I have learned the art of bonsai and many life lessons through him. Although he always says we are in charge of the HLG bonsai collection together, he continues to be my mentor and all decisions pass through him. Jack manages the volunteers with great patience taking into consideration their experience and knowledge with each task assignment.

All questions are answered very thoughtfully and carefully whether it is about a tree, an insect or any other nature related question. In recent years, if he doesn't know the answer, he will ask us iPhone users to look it up.

Design decisions are voted on by all interested volunteers. Jack calls this an advisory vote, but Jack will usually make the final say. Or, we will decide to wait on a decision and think about it again the next time it comes up.



*Jack leads a repotting session of Clive Taylor's Birch Forest at Hidden Lake Gardens with volunteers Don Loveland, Doug Knapp and Bob Bauer. Photo by Jay Sinclair.*

Occasionally, someone will bring in some pre-bonsai material for Jack to advise them on during our Thursday work sessions at Hidden Lake Gardens. Jack's years of experience of finding the hidden bonsai in unseemly pieces of nursery stock shines during these moments. Before any cuts are made, he always asks "If you are willing...". And then if they are willing Jack will wield a chopstick as a pointer and allow the participant to make all the cuts at his direction. One by one the branches fall and then they may be left with a curvy tapered stick and think they may have made a mistake. But then the reassuring quote is said "If you cut off everything you don't like, you have to like what's left. If you don't have anything left, go get another plant." A bonsai in the making is well on its way in a short time.

Much of Jack's contribution is to keep detailed notes of work done on each bonsai in a spiral bound notebook. During the winter, Jack transfers all of those notes onto individual note cards for each bonsai. In late fall, Jack also takes individual photographs of each bonsai and they are stored for future reference.



*Author Diane Faust and Jack humoring bonsai volunteers at Hidden Lake Gardens. Fall 2019. Photo by Jay Sinclair.*

So, at the age of 87, Jack continues to be very much an active part of the Hidden Lake Gardens bonsai effort. I am proud to be a small part of it all and I enjoy more than anything working on the trees alongside Jack and the volunteers. And, it is true, the trees will teach you about them and about yourself.

*If you have missed any of the previous issues of this publication they are located in the [History section of the AABS website](#).*

**NEXT WEEK: *John Naka Visits Michigan***

#### **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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