

Lifestyle

Miniature trees

The ancient art of bonsai finds modern enthusiasts

By Robin Sheffield
Correspondent

Killed any house plants lately?

Mark Karczewski knows just how you feel. The plant was green when it was in a pot in the store. You bought it, took it home, watered it, put it in a window — and were dismayed when it turned brown, shriveled up, crumbled before your very eyes.

Karczewski received a number of plants from his father in the mid-'80s and "lost a lot of them," by his own account.

He began asking florists, nurseries and friends for advice. Karczewski had more than the usual concerns of new plant owners; these plants were all trees that his father had tried to raise bonsai style. Eventually Karczewski learned about the Prairie State Bonsai Society, a group of people who met regularly to discuss the problems of plant care specific to bonsai.

The word "bonsai" may sound intimidating, but bonsai are not rare breeds of plants. They are potted trees, Karczewski said. Often, they are everyday tree species that have been sculpted by their owners to remain miniature, while obtaining, over time, an appearance that imitates aged trees of normal size.

Bonsai society members grow their trees in pots. They place maples and redwoods and pines on table tops instead of in parks and forests. They spend patient hours shaping the growth of limbs and branches with wires, occasionally removing entire limbs and tree tops, as well as cutting tree leaves, to obtain a desired shape. They fuss over the soil mixture and watering needs, which are different from the needs of trees that grow naturally. And they consider it no time at all if they must wait 10 years or more to see results.

And the word is "bone-sigh," if you please. Pronounce it with the "z" sound instead of the soft "s" sound and you are marked as one of the uninitiated.

Brown thumbs, as well as green thumbs, are welcome to learn the art, said Lisa Kolick, co-president of the Prairie State Bonsai Society.

"I wouldn't call myself a great gardener," said Kolick,

who lives in Lisle. "I just admired the art. ... I had just over the years read about bonsai and seen the trees and really admired them."

Five years ago, she found a book on bonsai in her local bookstore, and that was the start of her involvement with the hobby and society.

Art of bonsai

To the 110 members of the Prairie State Bonsai Society, plants are an art form. Survival of the plants is essential, of course. But there is an entire world to create among their branches.

"The goal of bonsai is to make a tree look like an ancient tree. That's the goal. And you have to figure out what makes trees ancient looking," Karczewski said.

And it takes time. "The discipline you really have to rely on is patience," said Michael Lynch, a Lemont resident who is the club's other co-president. "These trees are living art. They continue to grow and change shape. Yes, you prune them and you shape them and you wire

'It can be a lifelong hobby, kind of like golf. It's difficult to master, but you love doing it.'

Mark Karczewski

Bonsai hobbyist

the branches in place to gain a certain look ... but that look may be 10 years away."

The society, which meets 11 times a year at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, provides information for members, about 45 percent of whom are beginners to intermediate in their knowledge, Lynch said.

During the 2001 season, three bonsai "masters" from out of state will speak on their areas of expertise at the society's meetings and five other workshops on bonsai-related subjects have been planned, he said.

Kolick said membership in the society made her beginning efforts at bonsai less frustrating. "When things would happen, there were a lot of people to ask. ... The club has all that information and they are per-



Liberty photos by Sidney Thoms

Lisa Kolick of Lisle prunes her Japanese black pine tree. The tree, below, is a work in progress. Kolick, co-president of the Prairie State Bonsai Society, said her membership in the society made her beginning efforts at bonsai less frustrating.

fectly willing to disseminate it to members and even to people who just come to the meetings," she said.

Most society members started out as plant lovers, but their interest eventually focused on bonsai. "I tried to grow orchids, but they didn't work," confessed Dick Anderson, a Downers Grove resident who turned his attention instead to bonsai and now owns 40 trees.

Being comfortable with the horticulture of the trees is the biggest initial hurdle for getting into the art, Kolick said. "Making sure they're getting the right amount of water ... making sure they're getting the right amount of sun ... what to do in winter," she said.

But it's a worthwhile effort, club members say.

"I guess it's a very relaxing hobby. To take a tree and work on it — that's just a relaxing thing to do," Anderson said.

Lynch's interest in the hobby began while living in California where he also raised cacti.

"Both [plants] are slow growers. There's less needles in bonsai," he joked.

Lynch, a civil engineer for a real estate firm, found by learning different bonsai trimming techniques, he could "bring scenes of nature that you see in high mountain areas down to [your] bench," he said.

"All of the art is really bent on nature's own design," Kolick added. "It's really about being harmonious with nature. I find that very interesting. ... It's



made me much more observant about how trees grow."

"A lot of people don't realize that a bonsai tree ... could be kept 12 inches or under its entire life ... through constant pruning its entire life, and through roots pruning," said Karczewski, a Forest Park resident.

If a tree is inclined by nature to produce fruit, such as apples, it will do so, and the apples will be the size they would have been had the tree been allowed to grow naturally, he added.

Training a tree such as a maple or juniper or redwood that often grow in nature to amazing heights, so that the tree maintains a constant minia-

ture size, is achieved by the regular trimming and care of the plant's roots.

"You've got to keep the roots balanced with the top [of the tree]. If the top gets too big, then the roots can't support them. If you let the roots go, they'll get root bound in the pot," Anderson said.

Hobby has ancient roots

The notion of bonsai began centuries back when traveling physicians, perhaps in India, used roots as medicinal cures. They traveled widely dispensing their medicine, and regarded the trees as a portable pharmacy,

See **Bonsai**, Page 19

Lifestyle

Bonsai

Continued from Page 17

providing fresh roots while remaining a convenient travel size, Karczewski said. The word "bonsai" means literally "tree in a pot," he said.

It was the Japanese who made bonsai an art form. Interest in bonsai began in the United States in the 1920s and '30s, and by the early 1960s American bonsai hobbyists began applying their art to native U.S. trees like the redwood and the maple.

Interest in bonsai is growing because it is "a very low-tech, relaxing kind of thing, and our world right now is very high tech, high speed," said society member Dan Kosta, who lives in Westchester.

In expertise, Americans "are still far off, but we're still learning," Karczewski said.

At the time Karczewski found the Prairie State Bonsai Society, it was the Triton College Bonsai Society. It changed its name after the meeting site was moved to the Morton Arboretum in Lisle and again five years ago when the society moved its meetings to the College of DuPage.

"It can be a lifelong hobby, kind of like golf. It's difficult to master, but you love doing it. Always learning," Karczewski said.

His devotion has paid off. Karczewski now has around 100 trees.

Failure has been part of the learning curve for many hobbyists.

"I talk to so many people who say, 'I got this tree. People gave it to me for a gift and it died.' And I say, 'Welcome to the world of bonsai.' You can't have an award-winning tree without a few failures," Kolick said.

Chicago's winters don't help much either, Anderson added. "Chicago's a hard place to grow bonsai. ... During summers, fine. But during the winter, the temperatures go up and down like a roller coaster," he said.

Getting the right information can frustrate the beginner. "You walk into the average nursery — they don't know how to spell it," he said.

Some of Anderson's 40 bonsai are tropicals and stay indoors, preferring a minimum 70-degree temperature. In the winter, they are kept downstairs in his house under fluorescent light, Anderson said. His other plants are "hardies," and need to be outside year round, tolerating winter temperatures of 30-35 degrees. Chicago winters rarely remain even that warm, so Anderson puts his hardies in "bigger containers," mulches them every two to three weeks and keeps everything near a 1500-watt heater in the garage for temperature maintenance.

When he takes his annual Hawaiian vacation in January, his plants are left in the care of a house sitter, Anderson said. "For two weeks, all he needs to do is water them," he said.

In summers, some trees need to be watered twice a day, while others prefer somewhat drier conditions. The plants are rooted to a more porous soil, not the kind of soil they normally inhabit when allowed to grow naturally, and this accounts for additional watering attention, he explained.

Kolick said she began her hobby with some trees she bought at a local nursery, including a Japanese maple, juniper and dwarf Alberta spruce. "Just plain old nursery trees. Not in bonsai pots or anything," she said.

Kolick got several more plants by winning some of the raffles that are held at the club meetings.

She spent a year nurturing the trees so that she knew they were thriving, and then she began taking classes to learn about wiring, trimming and shaping the trees.

"It's not what I call a casual hobby because you have to be a little more attentive to the plants," she said.

Kolick is keenly aware of the amount of time required for her bonsai hobby. She has three children and a dog, is finishing an undergraduate degree at DePaul University, and is a leader of Girl Scout Troop 56 at Steeple Run School in Naperville. Because of the demands on her time, she has given away or sold many of her 35 to 40 trees, and is now down to about 15 trees.

Anderson said he spends 15 to 20 hours a week fussing over his plants in summer, but less

time in winter.

Getting started

Once learned, bonsai can be a hobby for the entire family. Katie Lyrtch, 4, "is a good soil mixer" and got her own Siberian elm this past summer, her father said.

For beginners like Katie, experienced bonsai enthusiasts recommend starting with a ficus or schefflera, partly because they are tropical plants and prefer life indoors. But if the beginner has room outdoors, "Go to Frank's [Nursery's] and buy a juniper and make a bonsai out of it," Anderson said. "If you're gonna learn, why buy an expensive tree?"

"Your chance of success will be greatly improved ... if you go to someplace that carries merchandise and has knowledgeable staff," suggested Kosta, who works at a nursery in Hinsdale.

Trees that have been already shaped and landscaped can be quite expensive.

To increase the likelihood that your own bonsai story won't be a dried-out failure, go to the Prairie State Bonsai Society meetings, Lynch said.

Lynch, who shares the presidency for a two-year term with Kolick, said, "My whole mission ... I wanted to get a lot of information out to our membership. Our membership has grown 10 or 12 percent in our term."

Each meeting includes a raffle, with the winner walking off with a tool, soil, fertilizer or book.

The Prairie State Bonsai Society is one of two clubs in the Chicago area. The other is the Midwest Bonsai Club, which meets in the Chicago Botanical Gardens in Glencoe.

Most Prairie State Bonsai



Liberty photo by Sidney Thoms

Dick Anderson of Downers Grove keeps his tropical bonsai trees under a fluorescent light during the winter.

Society members live within a 12- to 15-mile radius of the College of DuPage, Lynch said, but some come from as far as Chicago. Annual membership fees are \$25 for individuals, \$30 for family groups.

The meetings start at 7:30 p.m. in a room near the cafeteria in the college's SRC building and last about two hours; they are held on the fourth Monday of each month, except in December. The group has a show the second weekend of each June in the Japanese Tea Garden at Fabyan Woods in the Kane County Forest Preserve at Route 31 and Fabyan Parkway.

Fifty trees are on display, and vendors, lectures and demonstrations are available, Lynch said.

The club has another annual show at Cantigny Gardens in Wheaton at the end of September or early October. This exhibit lasts two days and usually involves 80 to 100 bonsai trees, along with vendors, workshops and demonstrations by two bonsai masters, according to Lynch. It's necessary to preregister for many of those workshops, he said.

For further information about the club, call Michael Lynch at (630) 257-7586.

Liberty
Suburban Chicago Newspapers

Presents
Wedding Showcase 2001

"From This Day Forward"

Exhibitors, please call
Roseanne Zappa
(630) 368-8842
for information

FOX VALLEY MOTORCARS

Offers To You...
MERCEDES-BENZ SERVICING

Fox Valley Motorcars introduces to you a whole new way to service your Mercedes-Benz vehicle. We call it the Fox Valley Motorcars **Mercedes-Benz Personalized Service Program**. We offer same day service in most cases, pick-up and delivery, transportation to and from the train and even discounted rates on a rental car if we need to service your vehicle for more than a day. As our customer, we will have you know that you will be treated like a person and not like a number. So come and experience the difference, the Fox Valley Motorcars difference.

MERCEDES-BENZ WINTERIZATION SPECIAL
Get your Mercedes-Benz winterized with our service special which includes:

- Coolant drain & flush with new coolant added
- A Full Inspection Of:
 - Battery and cables
 - Tire tread and pressure
 - Wipers • Check oil and lights
 - Full inspection of belts and hoses

ONLY \$49⁹⁵

OIL & FILTER CHANGE FOR YOUR MERCEDES MODEL **ONLY \$29⁹⁵**

10% 20% Off! All Boutique Items Till The End of the Year

27W333 North Ave. West Chicago
Call 630-231-3400 for an appointment.
(Not necessary but recommended)

www.foxvalleymotorcars.com