

Lifestyle

Miniature trees

Ancient art of bonsai finds modern enthusiasts

By Robin Sheffield
Correspondent

Making the leap from simple plant lover to bonsai enthusiast was an easy step for members of Prairie State Bonsai Society.

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.

Mark Karczewski of Forest Park 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 meet 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 natu-

rally. 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.

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.

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 level in their knowledge.

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

Taking care of bonsai is a lot of work, 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.

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



Liberty photo by Steve Harman

See **Bonsai** on Page 33 Prairie State Bonsai Society member Dan Kosta has many examples of the ancient art in his Westchester home.

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Liberty photo by Steve Harman

Westchester resident Dan Kosta's bonsai collection includes (from left) a Lime Prickly Ash, a Barbados Cherry and a Fokien Tea Tree.

Bonsai

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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, 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 1930s, and by the early 1960s American bonsai hobbyists began applying their art to native U.S. trees such as 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.

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.

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

"I killed a lot of trees when I started. Trees are a little hard to keep alive in small pots," Anderson admitted.

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.

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

Getting started

For beginners, 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 already been shaped and landscaped can be quite expensive. "It's not unusual to spend several hundred dollars for a tree," Anderson said.

The oft-repeated tale about the man who paid a million dollars for a 600-year-old bonsai which then promptly died may be legendary. Quite often, people who are selling bonsai trees that cost thousands of dollars or more won't sell

to someone who doesn't know what they are doing, Anderson said.

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

"We try to cover tropical trees, your ficuses and schefflera, and things like that are grown in warm climates. And we have the hardy trees which are like your deciduous trees — the pines and the maples," he said.

The Prairie State Bonsai Society is one of two clubs in the Chicago area.

Most Prairie State Bonsai 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. Meetings 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 and another show at Cantigny Gardens in Wheaton in the fall.

Further information about the club is available by calling Michael Lynch at (630) 257-7586.



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