TROPICAL BONSAI SCHOOL

(The First Year)

Arturo Cid

The idea of writing an article about the Tropical Bonsai School was not mine but recommended by a friend that recently passed. It is a sad time with the recent loss of our friend Bud Shafer.

I have had the pleasure of being his friend for years. Anyone could not help enjoying his company, and his advice and enthusiasm for the art of Bonsai. I will miss him.

It is unfortunate that I was not be able to attend Bud's service because I was scheduled to go to Wigert's nursery to start the one week Tropical Bonsai School with Pedro Morales. When I mentioned to Bud that I had signed up for this course, he told me to make sure to good notes and submit them to Mike since he is always on the lookout for articles for the Florida Bonsai magazine. Bud was a great asset to our Bonsai community and was always thinking of ways to make it better for all.

The first day of school is finally here and all ten students finally arrive at Wigert's Nursery with all their trees, tools, and notebooks.

For me it was no easy task since I had to rent a U-Haul™ cargo van to load up fifteen bonsai trees of various sizes and drive one hundred and forty miles west to get to the nursery in North Fort Myers, Florida.

After a short introduction by Eric and a brief description of how and where to dispose of dirt and horticultural waste, he introduced Pedro Morales.

Pedro described the course and how it is divided in three academic years. He then introduced a couple of words to our vocabulary. *Oyakata*, literally means "taking you on his back", a term used in sumo wrestling to describe a person with more experience or with more knowledge who helps another with less experience. It's a relationship of full confidence on both sides and mutual respect. It is like a mentor.

The other word he introduced to our vocabulary is *Chowa*, meaning harmony. In bonsai "*Chowa*" expresses harmony between mind, hands, and spirit. This will help us live our lives in harmony and peace. The aim is not

to compete but to develop artistic and mental capacities to achieve the union of the body and the spirit in all the actions constituting a means of personal fulfillment.

Pedro distributes a vest for each student with the Tropical Bonsai School Logo. He goes on to explain how each year after completion of the one-week course a patch will be awarded to the student to go on the vest. It is a three-year course with an optional fourth year to be completed working in a nursery, much like an internship. Each year the segment is one week long. The fourth year is optional.

The first year he calls the *Year of the Saw* because there will be a lot of sawing trees and cutting them down in size for refinement. The second year is the *Year of the Wire* and I think there will be a lot of wiring that year. The third year is the *Year of the Scissors* and the fourth year, the *Year of the Cutters*.

The student that decides to do a fourth year can spend a week working either in Pedro's nursery in Puerto Rico or Wigert's nursery in North Fort Meyers, Florida.

Pedro starts the power point presentation with a brief historical review. Bonsai started in China and from there went to Japan. It later came to the US from Japan.

He starts an interesting discussion of characteristics of bonsai. Chinese Bonsai have drastic movements, dramatic, and sometimes exaggerated. The hands of the artist are not seen.

In comparison Japanese Bonsai is strict in rules, and sometimes seems artificial. Recently, artists like Kimura began the new generation of Japanese Bonsai.

Bonsai in Taiwan is in between Chinese and Japanese but seems to point a bit more towards the Japanese style.

The new Sumo Bonsai has thick trunks and trunk to height ratios of 1 to 3 1/2 or even 1 to 1 ratios. The African flat top styles are also new. Hon Non Bo from Viet Nam is like a Penjing but it has active cascade of water

(circulated by a pump) or even a mist making mechanism to create a specific mood in the scenery.

From this we go to the tree family of the day. Today we cover Moraceae family: Ficus, with interesting details, diseases, re-potting, soils, defoliation schedule and even were you can find the largest ficus tree in the World- India.

We break for lunch and start working on our trees with Pedro until way past 5pm: wiring, styling and repotting. It has been a complete day of bonsai and I am tired,

Second day of class starts with an in depth review of tropical infestations and a detailed approach to pest control: frequent inspection of your trees, identification of the offending agent, exclusion techniques that avoid bringing into your garden infected trees, making sure that you work on resistant trees, good gardening practices with avoidance of trash that attracts infestation.
These are all recommended as well as mechanical control of insects and pest, biological control with friendly reptiles such as lizards and frogs. Some insects such as ladybugs are also beneficial.

Insecticides are made for specific control and instructions must be read carefully. Protection is also very important since these can be toxic to humans.

Insecticides work by contact or have to be taken up by the pest. There are organic such as oils (canola, corn, soy). There is Neem oil with its active ingredient azadirachtin. There are essential oils (rosemary, citrus) that have low toxicity and are effective. Other organic insecticides like Pyrethrins can be very toxic to fish but effective in eradicating pest infestations.

We see a large number of pests in a power point presentation and start training our eyes in the identification. Just in case you are slow to learn, the power point will be given to you at the end of the week in a cd.

We move on to the tree of the day. Today it is in the Family Combretaceas and are better known to us by its common name, Buttonwood. Pedro starts by showing us pictures of Guernica, Puerto Rico. This is a protected area

rich in Buttonwoods. The fine for taking a tree is $500.

Driftwood trees are old trees fighting for life so use compact and minimum foliage when thinking of a design. The perfect Bunin should have seven curves and some say it should only be a pine or juniper but buttonwoods can fit this pattern.

Buttonwoods are susceptible to insecticides so never use marathon or diazinon. The driftwood can be preserved with lime sulfur.

The afternoon consisted of working on trees and a presentation on *Kuramas*. *Kuramas* are vessels, some in the shape of last quarter moon called *Mikasuki,* and the other in the shape of a boat called *Funagata.*

They are named after a river near Koyo, Japan, were they were collected.

Since it is hard to collect them we recreate them using hydraulic cement for strength and chicken wire of various gauges to give them the desired shape.

Our homework was to create the shape of our *Kurama* from a piece of chicken wire and bring it in the next day ready to put cement on it.

Day three starts with a test. Each student is called to go in front of the class and explain a style of bonsai that Pedro assigns on the spot. I was told to talk about slanting style. I was able to explain the a few basics pertaining to

the way the tree is positioned on the pot and the apex not being on top of the trunk line but to one side. I did forget to mention Nakas's rules of an anchor root on the opposite side of the slant and the first branch on the opposite side of the slant.

We discussed the basic styles in depth: formal upright, informal upright, slanting, semi cascade and cascade, as well as bunjin and broom style.

We looked at a power point illustrating some of the styles including wind swept, flat top, twin trunk and even looked at some unusual trees of the world.

Since it was threatening rain we decided to go ahead and go outside to do our cement work with our *Kuramas*, We applied the bottom and inside coat of cement and placed them on a table indoors to dry.

We covered the tree of the day, Gmelina Hystrix, gemelina phillipinessis, native to the Philippines. It is of the family of Bougainvillea and grows like one, and propagates like one, has good ramifications and is hardy like the bougies. Now it was lunchtime and we started working on our trees, getting ready to place the finishing coat of grout mixed with color on top of the cement.

The afternoon is to work on our trees with Pedro and finish the *Kurama*. I bought a Gmelina from Eric to style hoping to fit my *Kurama*.

Day four starts with finishing another coat of grout and color to our *Kuramas.* Some of us are very artistic. Eric and Pedro are making large slabs or *Funagatas*. The color ranges from dark red to terra cotta and from grey to black and all shades in between.

The power point lecture starts with Chewing Insects. We need to know their life cycle in order to eradicate them. Some have egg, larva, pupa and adult stages. This means that we have to spray every week for four weeks to kill each of the four stages.

To treat caterpillars they recommend insecticides that contain Bacillus Thuringienses (BT). It apparently kills them by giving them a fatal case of diarrhea.

Next come snails and slugs and a neat trap by placing a pot upside down and collecting these critters that tend to like damp dark places. We then dump them into soapy water. Do not smash them because this will spread the eggs.

Leaf miners are found inside the leaf, they leave tracks and tunnels with scars. We defoliate the affected leaves and use systemic.

The next lecture is about one style. Today we talk about informal upright. *Moyogi,* as it is named in Japan, is characterized by twisted trunk but the apex must be in a straight line over the base of the trunk. The first curve should be the biggest curve and then progressively smaller.

There are six basic styles and they do not cross over: formal upright, informal upright, slanting, semi cascade, cascade and bunjin style.

Each day Pedro will hand us a sheet with the tip of the day. Today's tip is using coffee grounds mixed in with our bonsai soil mix as root stimulator and to prevent pest infestations.

On day five, Pedro starts by giving us a preview of next year's curriculum. We will cover Bunjin style, driftwood, forest style, rock plantings, penjing, shojin and tanuki.

We will cover trees like escambron, buscida and portulacaria. In 2012 we will study fusion, kusamona, how to get a tree ready for show, and cover trees like Brazilian rain tree and jaboticaba.

Now he starts the power point presentation starting with Mites. They make wart like lesions. Treat with oils or systemic.

Borers: The carpenter bee will make a perfectly round hole on wood. Termites will eat wood or any material with cellulose. We have tree termites that are seen in forested areas if there is a lot of debris on the ground. There is also the subterranean variety that needs soil for moisture. There is a king and queen as well as winged and workers and soldiers. They can be differentiated from the common ant by the fact that they have no waistline, only a neck.

Power post beetles eat under the cortex of the tree and can damage elms and buttonwoods. Coffee stem borers, flat head wood borers, and metallic wood borers, longhorn beetles, coconut rhinoceros beetle and twig borers as well as carpenter ants all can weaken and damage trees.

In the afternoon we are working on our trees and some of the *Kuramas* are being used to pot some beautiful trees and make some masterpieces. There are some large *funagatas* that are used for large forest plantings.

The tree of the day was Fukien Tea - Genus anchusa (boraginaceae), there are around 50 species. They are slow growing especially the small leaf variety. This tree likes to be wet. A good fertilizer to use is fish emulsion. The flower attracts aphids that produce glucose and in turn attract ants. Sooty mold can be a problem and we can use 2 ounces of bleach dissolved in one liter of water to clean this mold.

The tip of the day is the use of a vinegar solution for soaking your bonsai pot to get rid of stains and mold.

On the sixth day a special dinner was planned and we were lucky to have a teacher of culinary arts in our group who was going to compete with Pedro in a cooking match to make the best "mofongo", a Puerto Rican specialty made up of mashed green bananas, garlic and olive oil.

The day started with a talk on plagues. Animals, insects and birds all can plague trees. The roach poses no damage to trees. Centipedes can be beneficial. Millipedes can be found. Bats can be beneficial. Little fire ants have a painful bite. Carpenter ants can weaken a tree. Silverfish are no danger to trees.

Birds can eat the fruit. Pedro gave us all the information pertaining to styles and pests in a cd. It is very useful for identification since it has a lot of pictures.

Plants can also plague trees, some grow on trees such as the dodder love vine which grows on mangroves, or Spanish moss which grows on oak and cypress. Too many epiphytes can choke and damage trees.

The tree of the day was Flamboyant or Royal Poinciana. The tree is from

Madagascar and India. You need a big trunk for bonsai because of the large compound leaf. It flowers in the hot weather with red flowers. There are also yellow and orange varieties.

The wood is soft and the tree can grow to sixty feet tall. It lends itself to umbrella, broom, literati or flat top style. It is styled by clip and grow. You have to dry it a bit to make it flower.

There is a Delonix Elata or White Royal Poinciana that comes from east Asia and has white flowers.

We had a wonderful graduation dinner cooked by the culinary professor member of our group, and Pedro made his famous "mofongo" a typical Puerto Rican dish made out of plantains. Pedro distributed our first year certificates and we took before and after pictures of all the trees that we worked on in class to make a file. He wants to see those trees in one year to see their progress and help with their development.

This was a wonderful week and a great learning experience. Pedro is an excellent teacher and mentor: a true Oyakata.