

## TROPICAL BONSAI SCHOOL YEAR THREE

It is July and time for Pedro Morales' Tropical Bonsai School Year Three. I loaded my minivan with 20 bonsai trees, materials, and supplies and headed for North Ft Myers. I arrived at Wigert's nursery to unload my trees and said hello to a few good bonsai friends who were finishing up their second year at TBS then checked in at the motel and to get some rest for the upcoming week.

### Day 1

We start the day making an exhibit. Each student brought one tree, stand, accent plant, and scroll. Pedro handed out evaluation forms for us to critique all 8 trees including our own tree. Pedro was very pleased with us. We are the first group to finish all 3 years of Tropical Bonsai School.

Pedro announced an upcoming convention for next year:

The 11<sup>th</sup> Latin American Bonsai Conference, "Pirates of the Caribbean" August 12-17, 2014, El Conquistador Hotel, Fajardo, Puerto Rico. All information can be found at: [www.felab2014.com](http://www.felab2014.com)

First tree to be discussed: Premna. The ideal tree for bonsai.

There are 50 species but serratifolia and microfilia are the best for Bonsai. Premna is similar to buttonwood but has smaller leaves with small white flowers. When you prune them regularly the leaves reduce dramatically. It is great for Tanuki, Fusion, Shohin or Mame since they are fast growing. Mealy bugs are the only pests that bother Premna. Treat with Tabasco tea, water with bleach or liquid sevin. Robert Steven from Indonesia promotes this tree.

Kusamono and Shitakusa.

Kusa=grass Mono=object or thing

Shita=under kusa=grass

When exhibited alone the term is Kusamono. If the same is accompanying a bonsai then it is called Shitakusa.

Same triangle principle: God, earth and man should be used when styling or creating a Kusamono. Pots can be ceramic, handmade, flat or even pieces of wood. When you use grass, it should be the highest followed by flowers then plants. The soil should be similar to their natural habitat. They need moisture and frequent watering and good drainage so place them on sand or lava rock. The height of the Shitakusa should not be higher than the height of the bonsai display table. Our assignment is to create a Kusamono. Find material and pots and make a Kusamono ready to be exhibited the next day.

### Day 2

We started the day with an exhibit of all the new Kusamono creations. I had run around Eric's nursery and found a tiny crown of thorns that I arranged with another small succulent in a small pot. Other students found grasses growing in the ground and made very creative arrangements.

The next lecture is on Brazilian Raintree: *Pithecellobium tortum*, which belongs to the Mimosaceae family. They like direct sun and grow umbrella style in pastures. There are two different species, one twisted trunk and one with a rounded trunk. The twisted trunk variety is often found in our area. The foliage has alternate compound leaves and thorns. It has a white flower that is short lasting, dries up and then becomes the seed. To get compact foliage you need constant pruning. Organic fertilizers are better for green foliage. Styles include broom, flattop, and forest.

Tip #1 Pedro centers the canopy in the pot, not the trunk.

Tip #2 Reverse taper should not be considered a negative point if the tree naturally grows with reverse taper.

A new topic of discussion is Taiwan style bonsai, which is a "Tropical Style". Pedro was a judge at The 10th Asia-Pacific Bonsai and Suiseki Convention with 250 very high quality trees. Judges pick the 30 best trees with point system judging. Then they go back and pick best 15. The judges go back for a third round and now pick #1,2,3,4,5, etc. It takes a whole day to judge the exhibit. They take into account shape, silhouette, trunk line, grafting, spaces, and visual impact. Pictures of all of the trees in the exhibit were shown

### **Day 3**

We start the day with a lecture on Fusion:

Many small trees of the same species are planted around a guide. Plant them neatly around the guide and start growing the branches. Another technique is to use a wire frame instead of wood. The frame structure gives you taper since it is thick at the bottom and gets progressively thinner as it moves up.

Doug Philips wrote an article in International Bonsai magazine. He placed one hundred trident maple seedlings around a wood structure that was carved to have some movement and taper. You can see this procedure on his blog:

<http://www.dugzbonsai.com/tridenttrunk.htm>

(5/9/2016 note- site no longer active but you can search for Doug Philips Trident Trunk).

The second presentation of the morning was a Slide show that Pedro made when he toured some of the bonsai nurseries in Japan 2003. He visited different artists and was showing pictures of their collections:

Kobayashi, Kimura, and Yamada who is famous for his gardenias. We saw Takeyama, Kato, Murata, and Hamano collections in the Omiya Bonsai Village. The artists love visits from the public and you can buy pots or trees if you are willing to dig deep in your pockets.

### **Day 4**

*Ixora* is from India and Asia, belongs to the Rubiaceae family and comes in different colors- red, white, and yellow. In bonsai we use the dwarf variety. The

flower is similar to the Maltese cross. They like good drainage soil, full sun, and acid fertilizer at least twice per year.

Water Jasmine - *Wrightia religiosa*. Used in Indonesia and Taiwan. 40 to 45 days after defoliation it has full boom. In the USA we grow them for the flowers. They are fast growing and can be repotted every 6 to 8 months; can be wired. It has compound opposite leaves. Flowers are fragrant and used for perfume. Varieties include double flowers and single flowers. For shohin size the dwarf variety is used.

After the lectures each day we started working on our trees having the great advantage of Pedro's experience when it comes to making hard decisions. Each student was given a topic and has to make a 15-minute power point presentation. The presentations will be part of the final exam. The topics were random and Pedro promised to choose something that would not be familiar to the student and encourage the student to become knowledgeable and confident. There were also plans for "Tapas night"; food seems to be an important part of bonsai work in the TBS.

## **Day 5**

The lecture on Day 5 was Judging, Setup and Exhibit: Triangulation of the trees and accompanying plants. The tops of the trees should flow high and low, using different size trees. The floor plan of the exhibit area should have important spots noted. The first tree the viewer sees as he walks through are the best trees and should be placed in these spots. The black spots are the hardest to see by the viewer. The least attractive trees go in these spots. The medium important spots take the rest of the trees.

Trees should not have their apex pointing towards a corner. The tables should be high tables so the viewer can see the exhibit at eye level without having to squat. The backdrop should be big enough to cover the entire background. Each tree stand should be the right size and height for the tree. Tables should be clean and not scratched. The moss should be clean; different size and varieties of moss should be used. Ferns and figurines should be size appropriate for the tree.

Next lecture: Grafting-root and branches, a propagation method. A portion of tissue from a plant is attached to the tree. This is mainly used in fruit trees. Types include approach grafting, wedge grafting, bud grafting, and bypass grafting. Pedro showed slides of each of these techniques. Root grafting is also very useful to cover ugly cuts and to add character.

Next topic: Bald Cypress - *Taxodium distichum* (Taxi means yew).

Bald Cypress grow in swamps on the Atlantic coast of the US. Their base can be impressive. The triangular formal or informal upright shape is a common style. Vaughn Banting, working with one of his students, Guy Guidry, was the first to use the flat top term. They thought this style was more natural for this tree.

Next lecture was Judging Bonsai. It is unfair to judge styles that you are not

familiar with i.e., Japanese judging Chinese bonsai would be unfair. A good judge should be impartial. He should have a basic knowledge of style, horticulture, how to shape them.

### **Day 6**

Malpighia - has fruits and opposite leaves. Use organic fertilizer to stimulate branches and orchid fertilizer to stimulate fruit and flowers. It is ideal for Shohin.

Next, Pedro showed and commented on pictures taken of beautiful bonsai from all over the world.

For our last program of the day, Pedro made a statistical analysis of the comments made in judging the exhibit we had the first day of class. This exercise would be a learning experience in judging exhibits. Each student had a percentage of positive and negative comments made on each individual tree. We compared our positive and negative comments with the rest of the students on each individual tree.

### **Day 7**

Day 7 was time to give our PowerPoint presentation and style a tree for the final exam. Afterward, Pedro gave each of us our grade for the final exam and then presented us with the 3rd year TBS diploma.

Now it is time to load up my 21 trees and equipment and head home with all the knowledge I have gained from these classes. I highly recommend the TBS to anyone that is serious about improving their bonsai skills.

