

Tropical Bonsai School Year Two

By Arturo Cid

Last year before the Tropical Bonsai School started I lost a good Bonsai friend, Bud Shafer. Bud died unexpectedly and it was a great shock to his friends and family as well as the Bonsai community. Everyone that knew him misses him.

This year two weeks before the School started my mother had a cerebrovascular accident and died after being in coma for four days. This again was a great shock and a painful experience.

In a way this school has not only been instructive and very inspiring but to me has been a place where I can recuperate from a stressful situation. Eric and Andrea are such great hosts that you feel are among friends.

This year I did not have to rent a cargo van since all my trees fit into my Honda Odyssey, which I recently purchased and now call my Bonsai Mobile.

After the short trip to Eric's nursery in North Fort Myers I unloaded my trees and checked in at the hotel eager to start the next day.

The second year TBS material to be discussed in detail included the following: first meeting Bunjin style and Escambron, second meeting Shohin and Mame, Neea, third meeting Bonsai design, Portulacaria, fourth meeting Forest, Penjing and Muleta, fifth meeting, driftwood, Tanuki and Bucida spinosa and last meeting, rock planting and final exam.

Day One

Day one starts with Pedro's tip of the day. Rusty tools can be cleaned by immersing them in a pitcher of water, adding 2 Alka Seltzer tablets and leaving them in the solution for twenty-four hours.

The first lecture was on Bunjin (Men of Books) or Literati style. It is really a Chinese style inspired by viewing mountains with slender trees. It is characteristically a slender tree with movement and the foliage in the upper third and usually potted in a round pot or equal size hexagonal or square pot. Other characteristics are good tapering of trunk and the canopy not wider than the pot.

This style truly describes the vision of nature and some describe the style as abstract while others call it modern.

Many species can be styled Bunjin. Examples of some are ficus nerifolia, premna, gumbo-limbo, gmelina, escambron, neea, buttonwood, Brazilian raintree, fukian tea, bald cypress and bucida spinosa.

Each day we cover a different tree as well as see many slides. Some slides depict a chronological pictorial of trees from the great Bonsai Masters.

Today's tree was Escambron, *Clerodendrum Aculeatum*. It comes from the Caribbean Islands, Venezuela, and Hawaii, has a woody trunk and very attractive thick bark. It grows as tall as 8-12 feet high, has thorns at the base of the petiole, white flowers and opposite leaves.

For fast ramification, prune it weekly as it is a fast growing tree. The wood is fibrous and will rot if not treated with lime sulfur. When collected from the wild they look like tall bushes and have multiple trunks.

Escambron is found around coastlines. Collecting them is not an easy task because of the thorns. Few insects affect this species. Caterpillars can be treated with pesticide. They like a good draining soil mix and will do well with a tray of water under the pot.

After this lecture we saw a film about a member of the new generation of Bonsai Artists in Japan. This film featured Shinji Suzuki and his journey to selecting one of his masterpiece trees and entering a prestigious Bonsai Show in Japan.

After the film we started working on our trees with the expert guidance of Pedro. At five o'clock when the day ended I was tired and ready for a hot shower and a good dinner.

Day Two

Second day starts with a lecture on Shohin. The word translates to "something small" that can be carried in one hand.

Bonsai classification by size has had some recent controversy since Shohin used to be no more than 8 inches now it is 10. Small Bonsai are divided in (1) Shito - no more than 2 inches. (2) Mame - 2-6 inches and (3) Shohin - 6-10 inches.

Shohin are becoming popular and their prices are going up. They test the artist in using the correct proportion, scale, harmony, proper species and natural appearance.

These trees are displayed on beautiful and particular ladder rung stands. The main tree assumes the upper position in the stand and all pots and species are different. Small trees add a whole dimension to the World of Bonsai.

The tropicals that are used are usually small leaf, dwarf varieties such as premna, ligustrum, serisa, neea, ficus nerifolia, and gmelina. Junipers and sometimes pines are also used.

Because of the size of the pot, their maintenance has to be different. Constant watering in shallow basins of water with sand or gravel is needed. They should be

kept in partial shade with frequent fertilization. These trees should be defoliated 1-3 times per year for leaf reduction.

The tree for today is *Neea Buxifolia*, native to Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands. The wood of this tree rots easily and cuts heal very slowly or not at all leaving scars that may need to be carved. They have light yellow flowers and red berries. They are commonly styled by both clip and grow method and wiring.

This tree is usually styled informal or formal upright and used frequently for forest plantings. It is also very good for Shohin or Mame.

Aphids frequently attack *Neea*. Pedro uses 1 teaspoon per gallon of lime sulphur that is antifungal and kills aphids at the same time. Sevin is also a good choice of pesticide.

It is time to work on our trees and of course since we covered *Neea*, I brought a nice one that needs a lot of work and some of it was started in Year One of Tropical Bonsai School.

Day Three

Day three starts with the "Tree of the Day", *Portulacaria* (*Portulacaria Afra*) also dwarf jade. This tree is from Africa as the names implies. It is a favorite food for elephants which also play a role in its propagation since the seeds are sterile and propagation is from cuttings.

The tree can grow up to fifteen feet high, has opposite leaves and the bark can show wrinkles in mature trees. It lends itself to rock plantings, forest and many other styles. It is easy to wire.

Next Pedro switches to a lecture on Bonsai Design. The dictionary defines design as a plan to accomplish a task. For the Bonsai Artist it is the tree.

The concepts of design include line, shape, color, texture, asymmetric balance, emphasis or focal point, space, harmony and rhythm and movement.

Line is the visual journey following trunk and branches. Chinese consider trunk lines and branch lines equally important while Japanese consider line and volume equally important.

Shape has to do with branch structure; it is what your eyes capture at the first moment. In Japanese Bonsai the hand of man is seen more than Chinese Bonsai that shows the hand of nature.

Emphasis or focal points could be nebari, the branches, the size of the leaves, the flowers, or even the pot.

Space makes all the lines stand out. When we talk about leaving spaces so that "birds can fly through" what we are doing is creating negative space that creates depth in our Bonsai.

Pedro has a point system and gives 30% for nebari, 20% for trunk line, branch position 20%, ramification 15% and silhouette 15%.

Back to our trees and more wiring, repotting, carving, styling and learning not only from our trees but also from our classmates' trees.

Day Four

Day four starts with Forest Style. Pedro points out that combining species for this type of planting can present a problem in maintenance so usually we use one species.

Saburo Kato has an excellent book on forests. It is recommended that trees should be different sizes: different in heights, widths of nebari and caliper, and spaced differently, small trees under big trees grow out looking for light.

The horizon in a forest planting is represented by the horizontal line created in the back of the container or Bonsai pot. We place small trees near the horizon towards the back of the pot and bigger trees towards the front creating depth.

The space between trees and pot on the left should be different from the space between trees and pot on the right.

Place trees in groups but they should be seen independently from the front and from the side. It is also important to remember that these trees have to be prepared for forest plantings by slowly reducing the root ball.

There are combinations of styles in forest plantings and some are slanting, some are broom.

We went on to see slides of forests created by Master Bonsai Artists such as Saburo Kato's famous "The Remotest Hill"

Pedro covered Penjing. In China there are three basic types:

- (1) Shumu Penjing - is what Japanese call Bonsai in which the tree is the center of attention.
- (2) Shanshui Penjing - rock plantings and trees may or may not be present.
- (3) Shuihan Penjing - both tree and rocks have equal importance. These are landscapes.

Stones should be the same type and color. Attention should be given to avoid lack of harmony by placing small rocks on large slab or large rocks on small slab. Also trees and rocks should flow in the same direction.

Pedro covered driftwood "The Spirit of Survival" by showing us how it is found in nature and then how to translate this to our trees making them look natural.

Terminology such as;

Jin - involving a branch or part of a branch.

Ikari Jin - "Anchor of God". Jin at the apex.

Jin Grafting - placing a jin using iron bar in center for support and glue.

Shari - involving the trunk.

Saba Miki - see though the trunk

Uro-Miki - hole but you cannot see through the trunk.

The lifeline should be in front and the jin in the back of the tree otherwise it can be interpreted as a Tanuki.

Tanuki is defined as what your eyes do not see, costume, makeup, illusion.

Something that appears to be what it is not. In the West it's called "Phoenix Graft".

It can be radical as combining driftwood with trees or subtle as adding fruit or flowers to a tree.

Now it's time to go to work. Each day I try to work on a tree or style that we covered. I have about 15 trees to work on in these six days and one is a forest with multiple trees.

Day Five

Day five begins with the "tree of the day". Today we are talking about Muleta-*Eugenia Xerophytica*. You can only find this tree in a small area of the southwestern coast of Puerto Rico. It is in the same family as Bottle Brush. It has a wrinkled bark that is attractive. It attracts aphids and ants and forms the same black soot that we see in Fukien tea. This can be cleaned either with Clorox-water (one tbsp. to a gallon) or 70% alcohol.

Pedro begins to talk about Rock Planting. These can be just a rock accompanying the Bonsai in the pot, root over rock, bonsai planted on a rock that acts as a slab, clinging to a rock or planted in the rock. Rocks in Bonsai represent the greatest symbol of creativity and inspiration from forces of nature.

The Taoist Philosophy describes water as the blood of the Earth and rocks and mountains as the bones. When picking rocks consider texture, and appearance. They should be interesting, with character.

Moving along Pedro gives us a brief presentation on a currently devastating pest: Chili Thrips. They are very small in size but can destroy plants quickly. It is attracted to schefflera and many other plants, including fruits and vegetables.

It represents a major economical problem to the agricultural industry. This pest is

identified by its typical scratch like damage on leaves and specks that move over a sheet of white paper after combing the foliage. It has to be treated aggressively. Use Avid alternating with Conserve to complete a once per week, three-week course. This will prevent the pest from developing resistance.

We took our group picture wearing our vests with two patches one for each year completed in the tropical Bonsai School. In the evening we had a wonderful meal cooked by different members of the group including another one of Pedro's specialties.

Day Six

The last day was our final exam which consisted of finding a nursery pre-Bonsai on each student's table, all trees are the same species and they were buttonwoods to be styled and judged.

Each student styled and carved their buttonwood and they all looked great. The trees were judged by Eric who determined the first, second and third prize trees. The winner was able to keep his tree at no cost.

This second year was a great experience and I highly recommend Pedro's Tropical Bonsai School for anyone who wants to get serious about Bonsai.

