

Tiny trees with deep community roots

FOR 60 YEARS, KUSAMURA BONSAI CLUB HAS CULTIVATED JAPANESE TRADITION IN BAY AREA BACKYARDS

by Laura Swenson

For a bonsai tree, 60 years is an impressive lifespan but not unheard of — the oldest known bonsai is 1,000 years old. For a hobbyist club like Kusamura Bonsai Club of Palo Alto, however, thriving for six decades merits recognition. This year marks the Palo Alto group's 60th anniversary.

Officially founded in 1960, the club's roots go back to 1954, when Yuji Yoshimura, a renowned bonsai master from Japan, traveled to California to teach a class on the Japanese art form, which entails using sculpting techniques to cultivate miniature container trees that mimic the appearance of regular-sized ones.

Some of his pupils went on to form Kusamura, and ultimately play a role in catapulting the art of bonsai into a popular garden hobby nationwide. The group generated several other clubs along

the Peninsula and produced one of the country's greatest bonsai masters, Toshio Saburomaru.

Decades later, the club still has many trees that have been sustained by generations of club members since the group's founding.

Michael Greenstein, a club member since 1986 and current board member, is among those responsible for tending to some of these legacy club trees.

"I get to keep them in my yard and enjoy them for many years, but there's also, you know, responsibility. If I were to lose one of these trees because I didn't take care of it, that would be terrible," Greenstein said.

Some of the club's trees are notable because famed bonsai masters such as the club's late co-founder and first "sensei" (teacher) Saburomaru — who helped generate several clubs on the Peninsula, organized the Golden State Bonsai Federation and later helped found bonsai

clubs all over the world — have worked on them.

Other trees carry significance because a member personally collected specimens from the wild during a trip to the Sierra Nevada, Mojave Desert or elsewhere.

Rita Kurbow, a club member since 1997 and a two-time former club president, said it's not just the club trees or trees with otherwise prestigious pedigrees that are favored by their owners: Trees can be beloved for how much transformation they've gone through or simply for what they represent. For Kurbow, an oak bonsai is her favorite.

"It kind of reminds me of this huge oak tree that was behind my house when I was growing up as a kid. I see that, but nobody else would," she said.

Charlene Fischer, a club member since the 1990s and the club's show chair, said bonsai requires both an understanding of horticulture and the sensibility of a sculptor: Achieving the beauty and splendor of a full-sized tree is no small feat.

"It's a living art," she said.

Bonsai also demands devotion, according to Greenstein.

He said that the trees, some of which require constant sculpting and attention for more than a decade, have taught him patience.

Some people think that creating a smaller-scale version of a large tree must somehow torture the tree, he explained. A tree naturally balances its top and bottom, however, so when a tree's roots are constrained in a pot, the tree's overall size adjusts.

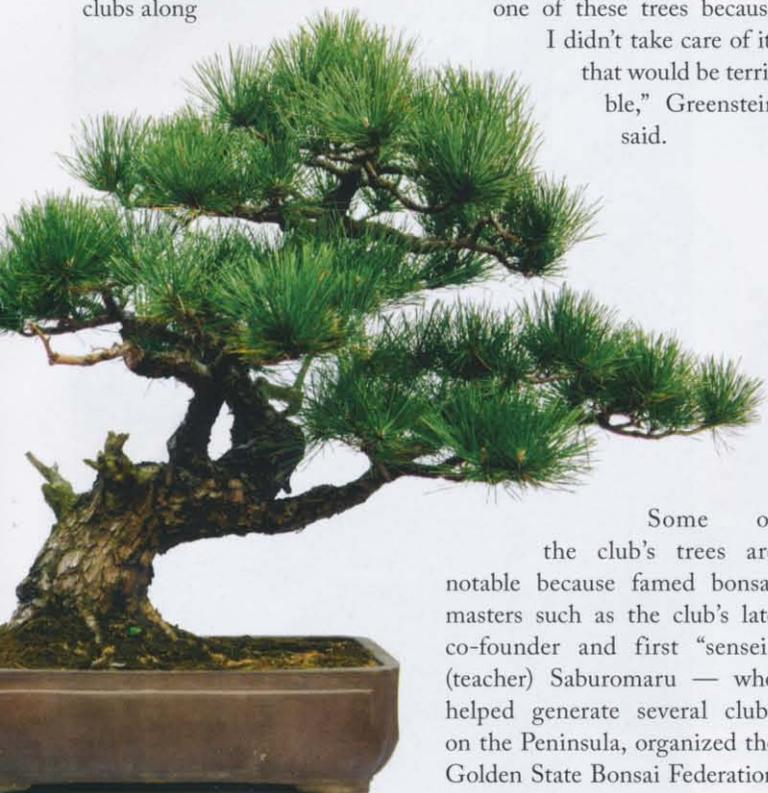
Another common misconception is that only some types of trees can be made into bonsai. But a tree of any

species and which lives in a pot, is a bonsai. Junipers are common and recommended for beginners because they can be worked on throughout most of the year and they have dramatic deadwood, which has the effect of making the tree look much older. Hypothetically, though, one could collect any tree from the backyard and attempt to make a bonsai out of it. Greenstein, for example, tends to several bougainvillea bonsai; Fischer styled a guava

THE ART OF BONSAI

- A bonsai is any miniaturized tree grown and cultivated in a container to mimic the appearance of a full-sized tree.
- Some bonsai trees can survive for hundreds of years.
- Traditionally, bonsai clubs in Japan were only for men and strictly adhered to style guidelines, usually enjoyed only by those in the upper class.
- The major trick of making the miniature version of a tree, which would otherwise grow to be 20, 50 or 100 feet tall in nature, is to grow it in a small, well-drained pot and to prune its branches every year to prevent overgrowth.
- Many trees require at least 10 years of growth and constant sculpting to become a remarkable specimen of the ancient art of bonsai.
- Bonsai trees are an outdoor plant and must be kept outside to grow properly.
- Garden variety junipers from your local nursery, various types of elm with small leaves and some cedar species are among the best tree choices for beginners.

—Information courtesy of the Kusamura Bonsai Club



Courtesy Getty Images.

tree from her yard into a bonsai; Kurbow loves the scent of her Monterey cypress; and Greenstein has approximately 100 trees that he tracks with a digital database. There are really no limits.

Acquiring trees “becomes kind of addicting,” said Fischer, who has been trying to pare down her 140 trees to focus on her favorites and really notice how they change over time. John and Sandy Planting, beloved club members since almost the very beginning when they joined in 1961, are said to have had at one point 2,500 trees at their Menlo Park home.

Regardless of skill level, the club is a venue for members to seek a fresh perspective on their trees.

“A bonsai is never finished, and so the club, I feel, helps you have other opinions and other eyes looking at what you’re doing and suggesting things you might not think of on your own,” said Fischer.

Greenstein has adopted the role of “Dr. Bonsai” in the club. At the start of each monthly meeting, people can bring their trees to him to troubleshoot how to achieve their particular vision. Every so often, all he might suggest is looking at the tree from another angle, which can sometimes be all it takes to make the tree into what they’d hoped.

Access to club veterans can be particularly comforting when caring for a celebrated club tree, which can feel intimidating. When Kurbow was a new member, she won a club tree created by Sandy Planting during a demonstration. She only felt comfortable further styling the tree when she was in a workshop under the guidance of other club members.

Kusamura welcomes beginners and is unique in its focus

on teaching. Traditionally, bonsai clubs in Japan were only for men and strictly adhered to style guidelines, usually enjoyed only by those in the upper class. But someone who has never done bonsai before can attend a Kusamura meeting and learn the art form from square one.

The club’s openness to beginners may contribute to its thriving for so long. The club’s current president, Richard Philips, and his wife, Barbara, have made significant efforts to recruit new members through their “Bonsai Demystified” presentations, which they’ve shown at local libraries in an effort to get more youth involved in the club.

Bonsai trees figure largely in the lives of their caretakers. Greenstein contemplates what they have endured. “It’s very humbling to walk by trees that are 150 years old and think of all the struggles that they have gone through,” he said. One of his bonsai came from a specimen collected from a tree in the wild that he estimated was 150 years old, based on counting its rings.

The trees can also help us cope,” said Greenstein, who has continued to care for the trees while most other daily activities have been halted by stay-at-home orders. “When I’m tending my trees, I don’t worry about the coronavirus or finances or anything else.”

For more information about the Kusamura Bonsai Club or how to cultivate a bonsai tree, go to kusamurabonsai.org. The club, located at St Mark’s Episcopal Church, 600 Colorado Ave., Palo Alto, is holding monthly meetings via Zoom. **H+G**

Freelance writer Laura Swenson can be emailed at laurajswns@gmail.com.



Over the past 60 years, the Kusamura Bonsai Club in Palo Alto has cultivated miniaturized trees, including this Japanese maple, top, and juniper, above, using sculpting techniques that renowned Japanese bonsai master Yuji Yoshimura taught the group’s founders in 1954. Photo by Sabrina Huang/courtesy Kusamura Bonsai Club.