

Highlights of the September 2009 Rochester Symposium

By Barbara

This year, the theme of the symposium was Shohin Bonsai - small bonsai ranging from 8 to 10 inches in height. There were nine instructors at the symposium and they used a variety of techniques to demonstrate that shohin bonsai can be successfully created using a wide variety of different materials and bonsai styles. During the three day symposium, they taught us many of the techniques that are employed.



Suthin Sukolosvisit is famous for creating bonsai with extremely exaggerated trunk bends. In one of his demos he worked on a juniper which started out as a midsize bonsai but was transformed into a shohin bonsai before our eyes.

First he jinned the top third of the tree and carved a shari in the trunk. Then he made the tree even smaller by literally forcing the curves of the trunk together into a very tight coil by pressing them together with his

hands until they actually started to crack. The coils were then wired into place. To protect the trunk, he threaded plastic tubing over the ends of the wires which will remain in place for 6 months to a year.



The person who was the biggest hit at the symposium was Jack Wikle who talked about growing shohin bonsai under lights. In actual fact I believe some of his bonsai were mame size, but he has been successfully growing small bonsai under 40 watt, cool white fluorescent lights since 1976. He brought in a chest from which he pulled out boxwood, cypress, serissa, cotoneaster, juniper, pyracantha, and cypress bonsai. He says that he has been unsuccessful with maples and pines. All of these trees spend 365 days a year, 16 hours a day under the lights. He tries to keep the foliage within 12 inches of the light and waters once per day. He maintains a temperature of 60 to 70 degrees F. but finds that humidity is less critical. His soil mix is 1 part

chicken grit : 1 part sphagnum moss : 4 parts screened surface. After watering first, he fertilizes daily with a weak solution (1 tsp per 5 gallons water) of 20:20:20 or miracid. We were able to get a close up look at the plants as he passed them around the room - they were truly amazing! He also had an exhibit at the symposium in which his bonsai were placed in a very unusual stand with a plexiglass front in which holes were bored to place the shelves behind. Lucy and I attended an exhibit critique with Taiga Urushibata. Jack's exhibit left Taiga unusually speechless because of its uniqueness and the amazing health of the trees grown solely under lights.





The exhibit critique was very interesting. We learned something about how trees should be displayed and there were also critiques of the trees themselves. One that particularly intrigued me was a long discussion between Suthin and Taiga about the figure of a man sitting in front of this little tokonoma display. Suthin asked if the man should be on the side of the display and Taiga explained that in Japan, people will sit around a tokonoma during social events. He felt that if the exhibitor wanted to suggest a social gathering, the man might sit on the side. The current exhibit suggested a man sitting alone and contemplating his tokonoma.

Harvey Carpella created a beautiful shohin bonsai planting on rock. He gave detailed instructions for arranging the rocks and gluing them to the pot with plumbers epoxy putty. All of the trees were then carefully placed in the composition and attached to the rock using muck, which is a mixture of 60% potting soil and 40% milled sphagnum moss mixed with water to create a paste. The planting was completed with the addition of shohin soil which is finer than regular bonsai soil. Companion plants such as ferns were added and the muck was covered with moss which was anchored with hair pins made out of copper wire. Small white stones were added as a finishing touch. It was incredible to see this beautiful creation come to life in a 90 minute time frame!



Taiga worked on container grown junipers that he had brought with him from Japan. He demonstrated how these little trees could be carved using chisels and a dremel. He said that container grown trees have softer wood than collected material and can be carved more easily. After finishing the removal of one of the live veins on the tree, he arranged the branches. The apex of this tree was actually created from two branches that were bent in a zig zag fashion to shorten them. Eventually the secondary shoots will form the branches of the tree. This particular tree sold for about \$600 at the auction!

Taiga also worked on a 20 year old black pine which had been container grown from seed. It was grown for 3 years in a plastic colander and was allowed to grow long and thick with only one main shoot growing to about 1 meter in height. During this time, the trunk was wired with random bends and the wire was left for 2 to 3 years until it bit into the trunk. These wounds scarred over and, after 10 to 15 years of growth, the tree was cut back and only the bottom branches were pruned to develop the shohin bonsai. He mentioned that, because pines are apically dominant, the growth has to be balanced so that the branches grow more vigorously. He cuts back to 2 shoots to let the sun in. Interestingly, this tree sold for about \$900 at the auction that evening!



This is but a sampling of the events at the symposium. As you can see, it was a very educational and entertaining event – well worth attending.