

# BONSAI

Journal of the American Bonsai Society



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As 2021 comes to a close - what about the coming years? What are the constants in the life of a bonsai practitioner? Too many trees, too little time? Not enough experience, not enough knowledge? Quantity vs quality? ...the list goes on.

A few of my questions: Have I continued a valued relationship either face to face or online with the bonsai community and has it been meaningful? Can I build a more connected community? One that is particularly close to me looks at the future of printed publications. The cost of production, printing, and mailing will only continue to rise. Is it time to "talk" about this? This Journal relies heavily on the collective knowledge that we have acquired as a bonsai community. What could be the medium of communication in the years to come? Is it time to begin this discussion?

Back to the present and this last issue of the Journal for 2021. In the opening article, Jonas Dupuich kindly consented to have his Zoom presentation transcribed for our readers. The topic **Bonsai Pot Selection** is presented in two parts. In this issue, Part 1 provides an overview of pots and the conventions that have governed the usage of the years. In the next issue, Part 2 will draw out opinions from the participants about their preferences in pot selection.

I really do enjoy including reprints of past articles - connecting the years that have passed in the evolution of a tree as it develops into a remarkable bonsai.

## From the Editor

The article, **The Master's Eye**, was originally published in 1993 with Martin Klein outlining the initial design considerations for a workshop azalea. Today we get to enjoy the tree as it is featured on the cover of this issue.

In **Tips and Techniques - Disappearing Soil**, Julian Adams provides ample reasoning to pay attention to the potting level of soil around the nebari. Providing a productive environment for roots always needs attention.

Todd Schlafer's article, **Douglas fir, Pseudotsuga menziesii, Following the structural work on a unique collected tree**, is a detailed visual account of the initial design and application of the future vision for this tree. Another valuable article on this iconic North American species.

The last article in this issue is Cat Nelson's **Moss for Bonsai**. It is an in-depth look at the nature of moss that is used extensively in bonsai display especially for exhibits. In addition, she has provided the details on propagation techniques as well as the application of moss on bonsai soil. For many, this will be a good refresher on past practice.

Lastly, this being the last issue of the year, the **Journal Index - 2021** has been included.

Take some time away from bonsai duties and enjoy the issue.

Bob King  
ABS Editor

# BONSAI

Journal of the American Bonsai Society

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### Cover Photograph

Wakaebisu satsuki azalea,  
*Rhododendron indicum var. 'Wakaebisu'*

Dimensions: 25 inches in height  
Container: Japanese, Tokoname pot  
Original owner: Martin Klein

This photo by Joseph Noga shows the tree in the Second U.S. National Bonsai Exhibition at Rochester, NY in 2010. The tree finally sits horizontal in its pot. Over the years it has been turned right to left a number of times. Because of the basal dominance of satsuki the lower branch has often been trimmed. Additional details and history of this azalea are contained in the article. "Cover Girl" on page 16 of this issue of the ABS Journal.

This azalea is part of the Larz Anderson Bonsai Collection at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, MA.

Photograph is courtesy of the US National Bonsai Exhibition.

The **American Bonsai Society** is an association of individuals dedicated to promoting an interest in the art of bonsai.

ABS acknowledges the contributions made by people of Asian nations to the traditions and nurturing of bonsai worldwide. Through its publications, symposia & other educational activities, ABS supports development of bonsai styling and production techniques that reflect the diverse personality of North America and encourages the use of plant species indigenous or best suited for bonsai in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

# BONSAI

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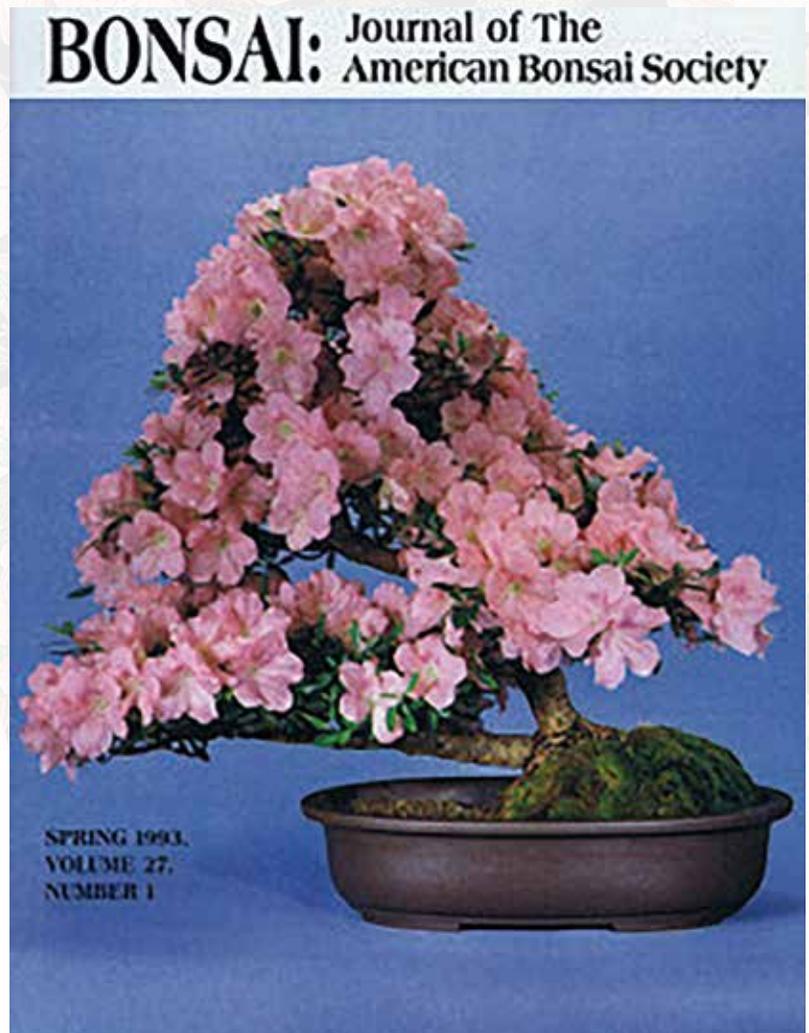
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# The Master's Eye

By Martin Klein, Sc.D.

*Editor's note: This article was first published in the 1992 ABS Journal - Volume 26, Number 4.*

*Figure 1: Left, Martin Klein writes: This satsuki azalea, *Rhododendron indicum* var. 'Wakaebisu', first appeared on the cover of the Journal in the Spring 1993 issue. It was quite a thrill for me at the time and I have always called the tree my "Cover Girl". About five years ago I donated this tree to the bonsai collection at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston. It has had its ups and downs over the years but this spring it was lovely. I have it in an old Sara Raynor pot.*



Many bonsai people develop a collection of books and magazines. These publications have photographs and sketches which we study for ideas, and to help develop our eye for bonsai design. Although I have many of these references, I often find that I can learn far more in a brief workshop with one of the bonsai masters.

The satsuki azalea, *Rhododendron indicum*, pictured was started in a workshop in April, 1985, in New Orleans with bonsai master, Ben Oki.

As in many workshops, the tree started as big nondescript bush in an ordinary nursery pot.

To me, bonsai workshops are a mix of anticipation and exhilaration, as well as a feeling of frustration at begin rushed. At home, one may have the luxury of being able to study a tree for a long time before deciding on styling, but at a workshop, crucial decisions have to be made very quickly.

Another source of frustration at a workshop is the decision whether to work on your own tree or to listen to the teacher as he or she goes around to each student. In recent years, I

“This tree breaks another standard “rule” of bonsai in that the spreading root base is not horizontal.

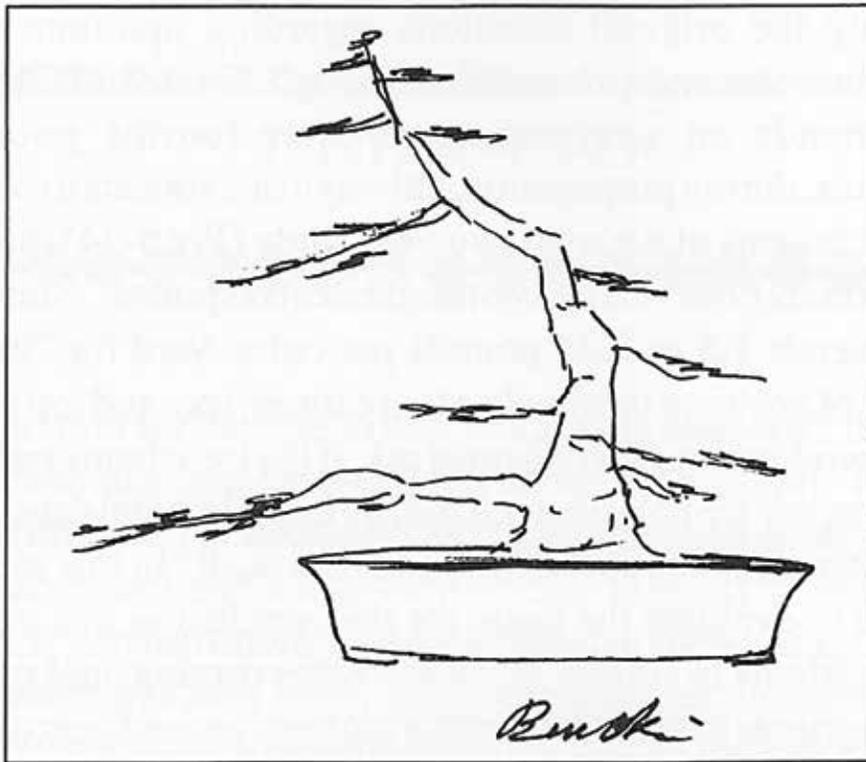


Figure 2: Left, Ben Oki's original sketch of the suggested tree design, April, 1985.

have tended to sign up to be an observer at workshops rather than a participant.

In this workshop, it was clear there was a lot to do, so while Ben worked with others, I began to study the tree. I took it out of the pot and began to clear away some of the soil around the base of the trunk to investigate the roots. Fortunately, this tree seemed to have a nice flaring base with roots distributed fairly evenly. This meant the trunk and branches would be the main factors in determining the front of the tree. It was also clear that the trunk was not straight, so this probably had to be a slanted trunk style or an informal upright style. As I turned the tree, I immediately noticed a heavy branch growing right near the base of the tree. It not only came out near the roots, it was nearly as thick as the main trunk.

Now most of the books and magazines I have read tell you that the branches of a bonsai should start approximately one-third up the trunk of the tree. They also tell you that

branches should not be too thick. It was obvious to me that the first thing to do would be to cut off this branch. Since deadwood is not appropriate for nonflowering trees, the branch would be cut off flush and then sealed with cut-paste. This would leave an unsightly scar which could hopefully be at the back or at least the side of the tree.

I was just about to cut off this offending branch when Ben came along to work with me. He studied the tree for a short time and then made a sketch in Figure 2. How can this be, I thought. This famous master must know a fat branch should not grow straight out from the base of a bonsai? I suspect Ben knew what I was thinking when I said, “But ...” and he gently admonished me with his kindly smile.

This tree breaks another standard “rule” of bonsai in that the spreading root base is not horizontal. The soil is mounded up on the right side of the pot, and the base sits on the side of this mound, tilted around thirty degrees to the left.

Figure 3: Right, "Cover Girl" in a Sara Rayner pot at the Arnold Arboretum, 2021. Photo by Tiffany Enzenbacher. Note how the tree has changed over time.

This arrangement allows room for the lower left branch, and the base spreads out enough to give a feeling of stability. This balance is augmented by the use of a relatively deep, plain oval pot.

As an exercise, take your left hand and cover the heavy lower left branch of the tree. Now turn the photo about thirty degrees clockwise so the base is horizontal. Clearly the master had the eye to break the "rules" to make a more pleasing design.

After the workshop, I somehow managed to hand-carry the tree back to New England, but I had to keep it indoors, since the last frost in our area is sometime around the middle of May. I put it in a temporary pot and continued to train it. The tree seemed to be confused by its relocation in the cold north, and for the first few years it only bloomed sporadically. Sometimes one area of the tree would flower, and then another branch would flower a month later. Satsuki are not very common in New England because they bloom relatively late in the spring, and our growing season is quite short.

When working with any flowering tree, especially one such as this which has fairly large flowers, you are really working with two different trees: the tree in flower and the tree with only its leaves. If you have a deciduous flowering tree, the style of the bare tree may also be a third consideration in the design. With a flowering, fruiting tree such as a crabapple, the tree with fruit may be a fourth design consideration. In the case of the satsuki, the most important consideration is generally the flowering stage and the overall "visual weight" of the design. With this tree, the shape is a



classic asymmetrical triangle with a gently rounded top.

In the case of the satsuki, especially in our cold climate, the neatness of the tree during the growing season may have to be sacrificed in order to allow for good flowering. The usual way to train the satsuki is to cut off every flower bud as it fades, cut off all upward and downward growing shoots, and to let the side shoots develop. Side shoots are allowed to grow and then trimmed back to a first set of leaves to allow for a more bushy growth with shorter internodes. Trimming is stopped in the middle of August so that flower buds can begin to form. Final formation of flower buds takes place during cold nights in the spring. In my experience, with the late New England spring and the early arrival of cold weather in the fall, the whole process takes too long. I have better luck when I stop trimming most shoots around the end of July, and then live with somewhat unruly growth after that. When the tree flowers, I trim off the ones which stick out and ruin the silhouette.

The New England Flower Show in Boston is in March, which is still the middle of winter for us. A few years ago, I kept the tree neatly trimmed and included it in the bonsai display by our local clubs, The Northeast Bonsai Association and the Bonsai Study group. But the tree only made a few flowers that year.

While the tree is flowering, I bring it indoors to avoid overhead rain which will spoil the flowers. This tree stays in flower a long time, but this only allows a short time for the new growing season. A solid mass of flowers also weakens the tree considerably, so one approach is to only plan to have it bloom every other year. This would involve drastic pruning after flowering the first year, training and early trimming the second year ending early in the season, followed by another flowering year. An even more patient approach would allow a third year in the middle of the cycle for relatively “wild” growth in a temporary, larger growing container or in the ground to increase the trunk size.

The author does not pretend to be an expert on satsuki. I am only describing my personal experiences. Some references are included which have much more detail on satsuki cultivation. Beware, however, that most bonsai references are written by Japanese, or Californians, or persons with elaborate controlled greenhouses so techniques must be adapted to suit your own conditions.

I salute Ben Oki and the many teachers who help us try to develop “the master’s eye”.

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## Cover Girl Update

*Martin Klein, Sc.D.*

This was the first time I had ever had a bonsai tree on the cover of a national publication and I was very proud, especially with my connection to the American Bonsai Society as a Life Member and Past President of ABS. I am a hobbyist, not a professional, and even after 50 years of working with bonsai I still consider myself an “experienced beginner.” Over the years I began to call the tree “Cover Girl.”

The tree, like many bonsai, has had ups and downs over the years. It is semi-deciduous, so it often looks sad in the early spring. Over time the tree was slowly tipped up so that the base (nebari) is more horizontal. The big lower branch remains, but it has been cut back many times and it is now narrower than the main trunk. The tree has also been turned back to front several times.

It was in the 2nd U.S. National Bonsai Exhibition, June 12-13, 2010, in Rochester, New York. The photo on the front cover is from that Exhibition. (Courtesy of Bill Valavanis and Joseph Noga.)

It has been in few oval pots, mostly just unglazed plain Tokonome. For years I searched for a glazed pot that might be fitting for this venerable lady. I finally was able to purchase one from famed bonsai artist Sara Rayner (<https://sararaynerpottery.com>). The photo on page 18 (Figure 3) shows the tree in spring 2021 at the Arnold Arboretum.

In 2016 I donated the tree along with nine other trees to the Larz Anderson Bonsai Collection at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston.