

Bonsai Intensive Program

Part 1

By Bob King, Editor, ABS Journal



Boon's workshop/studio is in Alameda, California. The main part of the studio is on the right as it opens out to the collection of trees on the left.

Following last year's article on the Ho Yoku School of Bonsai, this year's review looks at a program on the west coast—Boon Manakitivipart's Bonsai Intensive Program. This program of studies has been running since 2001 with numerous students completing part or all of the nine intensives of the program. With Boon's permission, I asked four of his previous students to participate in the survey. The four students were John Kirby from Arkansas, John Callaway from Kentucky, Cheryl Sykora from Minnesota and Peter Tea from California.

The questions posed are the same as before but I have condensed the answers and collated the responses, quoting significant parts when necessary. The article will run over the next two issues. I hope you will find the responses to the questions as insightful as I did.



Boon and one of his Intensive students work on bending the main trunk of a collected juniper.

What were the factors that lead you taking this course of instruction at Boon's Intensive Workshops?

John Kirby "Well, I vended next to Mike Hagedorn a number of times over the years, one thing that I noticed is that while his pots were gorgeous and beautifully designed and constructed, the trees he set up on his tables improved at an incredible pace—the refinement on a couple of trees (pine and juniper) that I recognized from year to year was amazing. I asked him how he was doing it, he said he was studying with Boon in California and was really learning a lot. Second, Howard and Sylvia Smith from Dallas talked about studying with Boon in these really "Intense" workshops, and to back it up their trees moved from being "nice" to being good. You

could pick them out at the Lone Star Bonsai Federation show, they were trees with incredible preparation and were displayed exquisitely. Finally, my good friend Ron Smith from Santa Fe (TX) started attending Boon's intensives. He kept telling me, it is amazing how much content Boon put into his instruction, and how demanding he was that you get each step of the process right, enabling you to succeed quickly and reliably. He said, "I was frustrated with where my trees seemed to stagnate, I had historically sold everything that I worked on. I thought it was a good time to improve my skills and to start working on trees with the goal of making them good bonsai, not just material with potential."

John Callaway "met Boon Manakitivipart at Brussel's Bonsai Rendezvous many years ago. For his demonstration during the Rendezvous weekend he chose to wire and refine a Satsuki Azalea. After his demonstration we talked about his Bonsai Intensive series and where one should start."

"It was an incredibly powerful experience, and I made it back to the hotel each night extremely exhausted."

"This session primarily focused on repotting. Let me say, Boon was right in his assessment that this is where one should start the Bonsai Intensive series. I learned so much about plant health and proper repotting techniques. It is with healthy trees that one can do the most work."

Cheryl Sykora thinks "the biggest factor was taking Boon's potting workshop at the Golden State Bonsai Federation convention. Boon is a very exacting, detailed

teacher. I like that in a teacher. I want to be pushed to do the best work I can do. Boon does that."

Peter Tea was still very confused with all the different techniques, after his first year in bonsai. "I would read books and try to apply what I have learned from them. During one of our demo's, Boon was the guest demonstrator. He brought a couple of refined trees to show in conjunction with his demo tree. Once I saw the kind of work he was doing, I knew I had to work with him. I checked out his website and decided to buy myself a Birthday gift and signed up for his Intensive program."

Give us an overview of the program and the framework of instruction and learning that Boon has developed. Describe a typical day or session in the program.

Editor: Since all the responses were very similar to this question, I have included Cheryl's and Peter's replies as representative of the instructional overview of the Intensive Workshops.

Cheryl Sykora wrote that "An 'intensive' day begins around 8:30am. We spend some time looking at the backyard trees on our own. Boon has very good bonsai in the backyard. You can learn from looking at wiring, branch placement, etc. We then have a classroom session with handouts appropriate for the season – potting, decandling, fall care, specific tree care, etc. Boon has a collection of videos, he deems worth watching. We usually watch a video on styling. By that time it is around 11:00am. We then go out to the workshop and work on trees. Boon determines each student's skill level and gives them material as appropriate. Some students are better at certain tasks than others. Each student's work is checked by Boon. If work is unacceptable, you

John Kirby's first experience with bonsai was in the late sixties and continued doing bonsai until the early 70's. He developed an interest because of his father and the fact that they had a nursery in the area Sumigawa's in Cotati, California. He came back to actively doing Bonsai in the mid 90's I was self taught, using books, "Bonsai Today" and attending shows/conventions. "I started raising and reselling bonsai in the late 90's and have been a vendor at a number of conventions/shows over the past 12 years or so."



John Callaway "stumbled across a garden center that had a greenhouse full of wonderful bonsai trees, pots, tools, and supplies. It was at this garden center that I found out about a bonsai club in the area and decided to investigate. I joined the Greater Louisville Bonsai Society that spring and quickly became more involved." served as the club president in 2007 and 2008. I continue to serve on the board and am serving as the local chair for the upcoming ABS/BCI 2011 Bonsai in the Bluegrass. In March 2008 I started Matsu Bonsai, a bonsai tool and supply company with the intent of serving the bonsai community.



do it over until it is acceptable. We go to lunch around 12-12:30pm. We spend the afternoon working on trees. Students are at all phases of training. Beginning students receive more attention from Boon. More advanced students work on their own. We continue working until dinner – around 6:30pm. After dinner we work until around 9:00pm. Each intensive session is three days. At the end of the third day, we have a wrap up, discuss what we have learned, and receive our certificate for the session. Graduation occurs on your ninth session when you accomplish some feat of styling, take an exam designed to test your basic knowledge, and receive a final framed graduation certificate.”

Peter Tea describes “a typical intensive day that is a mixture of Bonsai videos, worksheets and hands-on work. I think the worksheets are very important because they teach all the theory portion of Bonsai. A combination of theory and hands on is key to Boon’s program. Also, Boon provides all the trees to work on. Depending on your level, Boon will have you do a specific task on a tree. You can be repotting or wiring depending on the season. Once you get more advanced, he will give you more advanced trees to work on. There is lots to learn on advance trees that most people don’t get to practice because they personally don’t have high end trees or can afford to buy one. This is a big difference from other programs where they require you to bring your own tree. There was a point in my training, where I knew how to style a refined tree, but didn’t have any of my own.”

Reflecting on the lessons learned in this program: What were some of the more important “gems” that were the awaking moments for you?

Cheryl Sykora became “interested in bonsai since 1999 when I saw the Minnesota State Fair bonsai show. I joined the Minnesota Bonsai Society and took my first beginner workshop in 2000. I read magazines including Bonsai Today and the American Bonsai



Society Magazine but had difficulty grasping the techniques from the articles and the flat pictures. One of the first conventions I attended was the GSBF convention in Fresno, CA where I attended a repotting seminar held by Boon Manakitivipart”. She later enrolled in his winter intensive class graduating in the fall of 2007. Since graduation, she has continued to study bonsai and is gradually improving her horticultural and styling skills.

John Kirby—“I think the real Aha moment for me has been to see how you can do a number of fairly simple, yet precise, procedures at very specific times and with attention to the state of the tree that result in excellent bonsai very quickly—in a few years. That will almost always be better than the instant tree. Further, how using the appropriate techniques of foliage and growth management coupled with sound repotting and plant health management will provide you with material that can have that “big work” day to style and then flourish.”

John Callaway—“Proper repotting techniques were probably the most valuable thing I learned. A close second was proper wiring. The advanced techniques were impressive as well, but could never be achieved without the basics being mastered.

Grafting is another technique I don’t think I would have mastered without Boon’s instruction. Reading can bring the student quite far, but for me seeing and trying certain techniques first hand with a teacher looking over my shoulder really allowed me to master a number of techniques I would have been too frightened to try on my own. The confidence that resulted in having worked with Boon helped recently when I hosted a grafting workshop in my study group.”

Cheryl Sykora—“ Wiring has always been the most difficult activity for me. My awakening moment came when I finally grasped putting wire on in opposing directions and putting multiple wires on without crossing wires.”

Peter Tea—“One important thing I learned from Boon is that knowing how to wire a tree properly is only the beginning of Bonsai.”

Peter Tea “started doing Bonsai in 2003. By day, I am a automotive technician at a Ford dealership. At the time, the shop foreman was involved in Bonsai. Since I was new at the time, I wanted to get on his good side so I decided to ask him about the art. After about a year I joined the Midori Bonsai club in San Jose. In 2004, I started taking Boon’s Intensive program and graduated in 2008.



Where there things that you had to “unlearn”?

John Kirby—“My first intensive, Boon made me redo wiring until it was correct on one of his big trees. Because I hadn’t worked out the solution to the wiring problem correctly before I started, I kept putting the wire on incorrectly. It was large copper wire- #6 and #8, so it wasn’t an inexpensive exercise for Boon. He kept trying to explain to me what I was doing wrong, but I had established a mental block, so I had to get up and walk around for a while. I had totally flustered myself. Remember now, I have a PhD and had done a lot of precise fine-detail animal surgeries over the early part of my career, plus I don’t quit easily. After a few minutes I went back in and looked at what Boon was trying to get me to do—saw it and then completed the wiring. Granted, I only got one branch done, but I learned what I needed to do. Secondly, I never really believed those repotting sequences in *Kinbon* and *Bonsai Today*, especially those with deciduous trees and tended to underwork my trees. I now look at those sequences and say ‘That makes sense’ and work to continue to improve my trees roots and their overall health- no more halfway repotting.”

John Callaway—“I had only been involved in bonsai for a year or two when I began studying with Boon. I feel this was a good thing as I didn’t have any bad habits of which to rid myself. There was still plenty to learn and it was easy to become overwhelmed. However, the sessions are designed to push the individual and provide the most opportunity for learning”

Cheryl Sykora—“Wiring”

Peter Tea—“Since I’ve been doing Bonsai for only one year, I didn’t have many bad habits. I was able to learn everything fairly unrestricted from past practices.”

When styling a bonsai what, in your opinion, are the most important considerations? What should a person avoid?

John Kirby—“First off, the tree has to be healthy, strong and appropriately ‘conditioned’ for styling. This doesn’t matter if it is yamadori or nursery-grown material. Second, the tree will tell you a good deal about how it should be styled. It will tell you if you know how to ask, that is if you can see the potential for growth and development, and how to coax the tree to do what you want it to do.”

“I think the biggest thing to avoid is working on material that is not ready to be worked—dead or drastically weakened trees are not successes. Secondly, don’t style and then expect a miracle to happen ‘well if a bud will pop on this old branch after bending’ then we can finish the design. If additional incremental work is required (for example grafting) be sure that it will be both feasible and likely successful. Finally, don’t rush. Most of the truly memorable mistakes that I have made before and after starting to work with Boon have been because I have casually cut off a number of branches and then gone Darn, why did I do that...”

John Callaway—“I spend a lot of time studying great trees. ...I would suggest that those that are interested in making the best possible trees train their eyes as well. Work to develop the best trees possible, and don’t be afraid to do the work required now to improve your trees for the future.

Work should be done on a healthy bonsai. Only perform one major technique at a time, and don’t try to rush the results. A healthy tree will respond and recover from major work much more quickly, and you will be much happier in the long run.”

Cheryl Sykora—“Consider the species and how it grows. There is a temptation to do too much at once. Avoid impacting the health of the tree when styling.”

Peter Tea—“The most important thing I look at before I start styling the tree is the overall health of the tree. ... One thing people should avoid is over pruning and pinching their trees. To develop a nice full tree requires many branches. The apex will require the most branches so people need to keep more branches at the top. Also, branches that are growing up should not be cut, but wired down. These branches will give the individual pads their density and fullness.”

Editor’s note: Part 2 will run in the next issue of the ABS Journal - Volume 44 Number 3.