

Heritage Trees at the Denver Botanic Gardens.

"The best thing about bonsai is the story of the tree. Every tree has a story about the interaction between humans and the tree." Larry Jackel

The Denver Botanic Garden's Sho-fu-En, Garden of the Pines and Wind, is a very special place to the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society. This two acre Japanese garden was constructed in 1978 and displays mainly native Colorado specimens, many hand collected by a contingent of local bonsai enthusiasts including Bob Kataoka, Kai Kawahara, Harold Sasaki, Floyd Sunshine, Bob Krueger, Keith Jepson, Larry Jackel and Malcolm Correll. Kai Kawahara, one of the founding members of the Denver Bonsai Club in the 1950s was a gardener at Sho-fu-en from 1980-1993. In 2012 a Bonsai Pavilion and courtyard opened as a memorial to the late Japanese American news writer Bill Hosokawa. (More on Bill in DBG Part 2).

Larry Jackel, former President of the RMBS and avid bonsai enthusiast was hired as the a specialist for the Bonsai Pavilion, which features a wide variety of bonsai trees from native Colorado species to tropicals. This collection includes a number of "Heritage Trees" which have a connection to the local bonsai community that began as the Denver Bonsai Club and continues today as the RMBS. These "Heritage Trees" have been donated over the years to the Botanic Gardens and remain in the collection as a lasting memorial to their caretakers, many of whom are legends in American Bonsai. These trees all have stories that will long outlive their original bonsais artist and reflect their heritage, the philosophy and skills of their stylist, their "training" and care... and that is truly is their legacy. Here are a few examples:

1. Limber Pine

Originally collected and owned by Kai Kawahara

This tree was shown in the 1970's through the RMBS. Kai was a featured artist in Outstanding American Bonsai and is quoted as saying "The best bonsai are formed naturally, it is difficult for man to duplicate the natural essence of a collected bonsai. To create a truly great tree, you must feel it in very much the same way a musician feels his music."

When Kai (see January RMBS newsletter for his story) passed away in 1998 many of his trees were given to other members to care for. Harold Sasaki obtained this tree from Kai's family, and subsequently Harold donated it to the DBG in 2012 to be part of its permanent collection in honor of Kai. Larry Jackel reports that it had lost a branch and he has nurtured the tree, "continuing to advance the style". Respect for the original design concept of the tree is a tenet of Larry's belief about the tree's legacy and his goal to improve the tree as it grows with good horticultural practices.



2. *Ficus salicifolia*

Cultivated by Jim Robinson 1977

Ficus salicifolia is a unique variety of ficus with long thin leaves, this variance having been discovered by a nurseryman in Florida. Since its discovery, it has been extensively propagated. Jim Robinson ordered two original seedlings and started this tree as a bonsai as a 1-year old cutting, planting it in a root-over-rock style. It has been training as a bonsai since approximately 1977. Jim is quoted as saying "bonsai is a challenge both intellectually and aesthetically. I am especially fond of 3-dimensional art and bonsai is the best."

This tree was also passed on to Harold Sasaki who donated it to the DBG. It is part of the permanent collection and is on display in the greenhouse window for the winter.



3. Ponderosa Pine

Collected by Dick Meleney, 2004

Dick Meleney had been involved with bonsai since the 1960s. His collection was comprised of mostly centuries old naturally dwarfed conifers native to the Rocky Mountains. Dick operated the Colorado Dwarf Tree Collecting Company in partnership with Harold Sasaki. Dick is quoted in Outstanding American Bonsai, "I look upon bonsai as a perfect release from the stress of our high-tech, political lives, it offers a noncontroversial vehicle toward world understanding and the conservation of natural resources." This was in 1987!

In 1985 Dick hosted a "Bonsai Safari" taking 12 people from outside the local area on a collecting trip "up in the mountains" paired with 12 members of the RMBS. It was anticipated that 3 or 4 trees would be collected per person but in fact over 200 trees in three days were collected and the club raised over \$4,000 for the National Bonsai Foundation!

This tree was purchased from Dick by club member Don Osborn and then given to Todd Schlafer. Todd did some basic restyling in 2011 and then donated the tree to the DBG in 2013 in memory of Dick. Since its inclusion in the collection it has been repositioned in the pot..."advancing the style".

