

A Conversation with Takeo Kawabe: Sunday, 23rd September, 2012.

An article by Dr Malcolm Hughes; photos by Kath Hughes & Malcolm Hughes.

Mr Kawabe very generously gave nearly three hours of his time to talk to a small group of dedicated bonsai enthusiasts present at an event at which he was headline demonstrator, namely the 2012 Crespi Cup event at Paramiagio near Milan. He made these observations at his own request to this small group with Nobuyuki Kagiwara acting as interpreter.



Nobu Kagiwara introduced Mr. Kawabe and began by commenting on the Chinese juniper that he had been demonstrating on earlier during the event and would be continuing to work on later that day. The tree, created by Mr. Kawabe 30 years previously, had been collected from the region of Japan since devastated by the tsunami of 2011. The devastation was such that most of the trees from that area that have survived now only exist as bonsai.



Mr. Kawabe has many hundreds of bonsai, mainly junipers, at his nursery. When working on bonsai he has four important rules that he adheres to:

1. Thorough observation of the tree.
2. Identify what needs to be done at the early stage of working on the material.
3. Decide what should **not** be done at this time.
4. Recognise what the tree could be if it were left to live its own life i.e. the tree knows best.

From an understanding and with this knowledge, one can appreciate the most important principles of working with bonsai.

- It is always preferable to leave a tree unfinished when carrying out a demonstration – it is detrimental to the tree if the demonstration is taken to completion.
- There still remain elements within the bonsai world who expect a tree to be completed during the course of a single demonstration.
- He does however, receive considerable support from those who witness his demonstrations and comprehend his reasons for not taking a tree through to completion during a single working session. At such a demonstration, he does only what he considers is right for the tree. – hence the tree is often left incomplete unless the work being carried out is the final refinement following previous sessions.

Mr. Kawabe also holds the belief, shared by many in Japan, that the tree also has a spiritual dimension. In developing a bonsai from the basic material, we need to share this spirit.

He admitted that sadly, in a number of instances, bonsai are 'forced' i.e. too much work done on them in a single session or having the style of the tree created in such a way that was never intended in nature. This was often a result of the demonstrator having an 'ego-trip', a matter of showmanship. This always caused him to feel guilt. The emphasis should be on making the life of the tree as good as is possible, to allow it to live as it should, albeit in a pot. The tree itself can inform the person working on it what needs doing at that moment in time and, in a similar manner, inform us what should not be done. Any bonsai professional should understand that it is the health and wellbeing of the tree that is important, not the person's ego.

What is often advantageous is to have, at a demonstration, a few trees, each of which is at a different stage of development, thus providing the demonstrator with the means to explain the different techniques that can apply at each of those stages.

His speciality is working with *Juniperus chinensis*, a species of which he is very fond. The specimen he was working on at this event was a collected tree aged approximately 400 years. It had been worked on and developed as a bonsai over the last 30 years, and his wish was that the tree would be of benefit to others for many years in the future.



Bonsai are an integral part of nature. In creating a bonsai we are carrying out a spiritual exchange with the tree. The extent to which a tree is left unfinished is dependent on the condition of the tree – one takes the development of the tree as far as is reasonable during a particular session. Another essential point concerns the plans for the tree's development as a bonsai. Once work commences on the tree, it is important not to allow someone else to come in with alternative ideas on how the tree should evolve; if possible advise another person who might take on the responsibility of the tree in the future as to what is intended for it. In Japan, the creator of a bonsai often works on trees on behalf of nurseries or a specific client – Mr. Kawabe's view is that the tree should go to the "right" person. One of his regrets is that often, people only appreciate the techniques that

achieve a bonsai rather than what a bonsai is. It can sometimes be less of a challenge to transform a tree compared to ensuring its health and wellbeing over subsequent years.

At this point, Mr. Kawabe moved on to expressing his personal views on various techniques used in the creation of bonsai, some of which reflected the differences observed in the West as compared to his own approach involving older, more mature materials available to him.

Use of lime sulphur:

Mr. Kawabe does not rely on the use of lime sulphur. Old junipers such as those he possesses already demonstrate a natural whiteness over a period of time following long periods of exposure to the elements.



Lime sulphur becomes more of a necessity when:

1. 'Jins' and 'sharis', are sculptured or created by the artist, often on material which is young and has not aged sufficiently to evolve deadwood features naturally. This ignores the process whereby natural driftwood effects have had time to develop on old, old trees.
2. Lime sulphur enhances natural driftwood created by nature over time, but may need to accentuate the effect.

In the West, he perceives lime sulphur being used more for the satisfaction of the person who owns or created the tree. Over the years, Mr. Kawabe has worked on various trees some of which have driftwood effects which are not natural to the tree; the material has been sculptured in order to give an impression of age.

Mr. Kawabe's preference is to allow the tree to express its own natural deadwood. When creating or accentuating already established deadwood, he prefers the use of hand tools as opposed to power tools. Hand tools tend only to allow the stripping off of the softer wood, leaving the harder wood untouched.

Driftwood effects:

He does not do wrap-around techniques, i.e. attaching live material to dead wood. He does acknowledge that this can be done when older material to carve is unavailable and views wrap-around more as something to "play" with.

Maintenance of driftwood – regularly remove any moss from the surface of the pot if it is showing signs of growing upwards onto the driftwood.

Minimise fungal growth – this can be achieved by minimising levels of humidity during hot periods.

Watering regime:

There is always a risk of over-watering. The trees should be "seen" to want water, rather than be watered regularly at set times, which during periods of wet weather, could result

in over-watering. It is essential the tree is planted in well-drained soil.

It is safe to water during the hottest part of the day – many trees benefit from being exposed to high levels of light and minimum shade even during periods of high temperatures.

Jins:

In the Shinto religion, there is an emphasis on the worship of nature. One belief that is held is that God would descend through trees. The Shinto god is the equivalent of nature and in this instance, God enters through the jin. The uppermost jins on a tree are referred to as “Ten-jin”.

Wiring:

Economical use of wire – too much wire is detrimental to the tree. There exists a tendency for some to wire to the very tip of the branch – this does not allow the natural beauty of the tree to show and can compress the foliage at the end of the branch. When applying wire, it is important to:

- a) place the branches so that they have full exposure to the light;
- b) position branches such that they create an effect of maturity;
- c) let wire begin to cut into branch (only on conifers); when removed the bark will begin to plate over, again giving effect of age.

Resting of trees:

Bonsai require periods of rest when little work is carried out on them. In order for the tree to remain a bonsai, such rest periods must be relatively short, notably during the growing season.

A tree that is weak and needs to gain strength and vigour would obviously have longer rest periods.

After a major exhibition, it would be considered normal to allow the tree a rest period. An analogy would be the person wearing a suit at a formal function; later, is glad to change into more comfortable clothing.

This much personalised view of an approach to bonsai provided this small and select audience with a fascinating insight into the mind of one of Japan's leading bonsai masters. It also highlighted the importance of allowing time when creating a bonsai and subsequently developing it further; this is perhaps made apparent by the fact that the West lacks a culture in which trees are handed on, generation to generation.

For many of us, the perception of bonsai is to see a tree develop from basic raw material and become a perfect specimen, a bonsai reflecting nature in miniature within a limited period of time. Time is therefore the essence to many Western minds. Mr. Kawabe presents the opposite viewpoint – it is the tree that is of the essence, and it is the allowing of time, beyond that of our own lifetimes that will enable the tree to evolve to its full potential as a bonsai.