

THE MASTER'S EYE

By Martin Klein



Satsuki azalea (Rhododendron indicum var. Wakaebisu) by Martin Klein with initial training assisted by Ben Oki. Training began in New Orleans on April 3, 1985. Overall height 24 inches. Photo by Ed Eich.

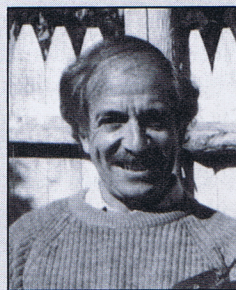
Many bonsai people develop a collection of books and magazines. These publications have photographs and sketches which we study for ideas, and to help develop our eye for bonsai design. Although I have many of these references, I often find that I can learn far more in a brief workshop with one of the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



About The Author

Martin (Marty) Klein is an engineer, entrepreneur and consultant in the field of ocean exploration. He is a second generation bonsai grower. His interest in bonsai began when a relative gave him a bonsai in 1971, which perished shortly thereafter.

However, this did not deter him, since he was determined to learn more about bonsai. He is also interested in suiseki, including stones with interesting forms such as faces.

He has been a Director for the American Bonsai Society since 1987. He has served as Judge of Elections and as Chair of the Nominating Committee.



of the trunk to investigate the roots. Fortunately, this tree seemed to have a nice flaring base with roots distributed fairly evenly. This meant that the trunk and branches would be the main factors

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Letters To The Editor

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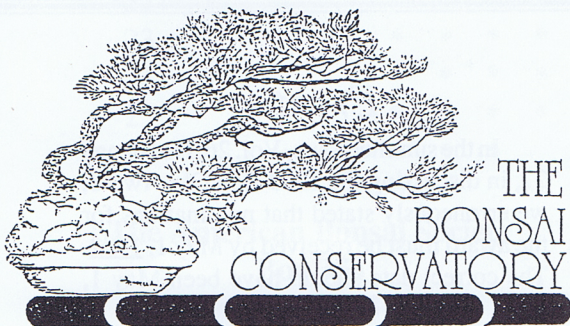
people know. It exists country wide, and not just in the east, as most people think. As Editor, we felt that it was important that the subject be covered to alert our members to the threat. Many times, physicians will not make an accurate diagnosis since the disease is rare in that region, and they are unfamiliar with the disease. A delay in treatment could mean serious neurological damage to a patient. This article provided clear cut symptoms which could be brought to the attention of the physician, thus enabling him to make a more accurate diagnosis. We felt strongly that this article should be printed for the benefit of our members.

The letter from Bart Bridges confirms our belief in the wisdom of including the article. It alerted him to the fact that he had contracted the disease and caused him to seek medical help immediately. Had he not read the article with the photograph of the typical lesion, he might have delayed visiting his doctor and, as a result, suffered the dire consequences.

The article on poison ivy was printed for the same reason. It provided some very important information on this form of dermatitis.

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**Martin Klein,
Andover, MA
(Continued On Page 33)**



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The Master's Eye

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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 on flowering 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 the sketch in Figure 1. 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.

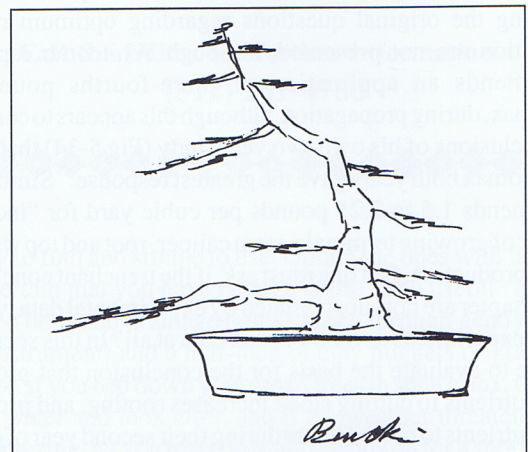


Figure 1
Ben Oki's original sketch of the suggested
tree design, April, 1985.

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. 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.

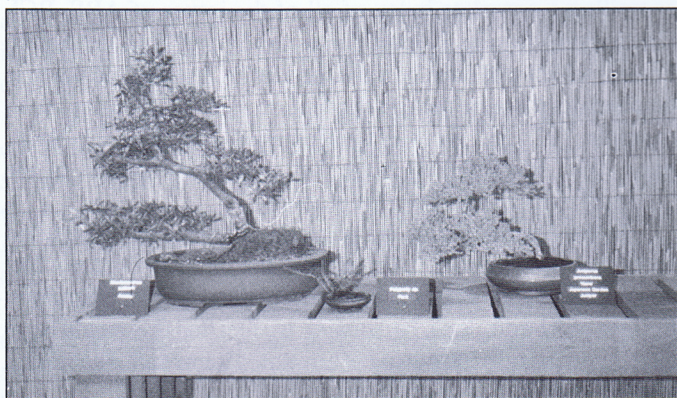
After the workshop, I somehow managed to hand-carry the tree back to New England, but I had to keep it indoors, since the last frost in our area is sometime around the middle of May. I put it in a temporary pot and continued to train it. The tree seemed to be confused by its relocation to the cold north, 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 *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.

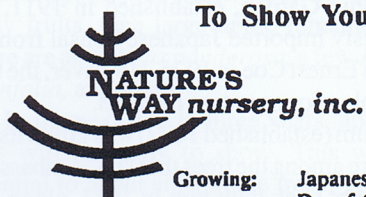
The New England Flower Show in Boston is in March, which is still the middle of winter for us. A few years ago, I kept the tree neatly trimmed and included it in the bonsai display by our local clubs, the Northeast Bonsai Association and the Bonsai Study group (see photo). But the tree only made a few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



Tree as Exhibited at Northeast Bonsai Association/ Bonsai Study Group display, March 1989.

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

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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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