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By **Stephanie Kendrick**



By Craig T. Kojima, Star-Bulletin

Root structure is one of the focal points of bonsai. This plant is one of about 400 display-quality bonsai at Walter Liew's Dragon Nursery. "Just like my wrinkle on my forehead, it takes years to develop," he said.

Bonsai keeps artists young

A COLLECTOR of oil paintings does not have to be a painter. A collector of pottery does not have to be a potter. They collect finished works of art.

A bonsai, on the other hand, may be perfect when it is acquired, but as long as the plant is alive, it is a work-in-progress.

"A bonsai is a never-finished art. It is a sculpture that is never done," said Walter Liew, owner of Dragon Nursery in Waimanalo and creator of the planned Hawaii Bonsai Culture Center.

Liew's will be one of the nurseries toured next week by attendees of the international bonsai conference, Bonsai: International Friendship into the 21st Century.

About 300 world-class hobbyists are expected to attend, and Liew and other members of the Hawaii Bonsai Association are busy getting ready for their guests.

FOREST IN MINIATURE

- ▶ **What:** Bonsai: International Friendship into the 21st Century
- ▶ **When:** July 5-8, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- ▶ **Where:** Sheraton Waikiki Hotel
- ▶ **Cost:** \$375 for full conference; \$100 for one day, includes dinner
- ▶ **Call:** 527-6989
- ▶ **Internet:** visit <http://www.takase.com/BCI2000>

A large stretch of bare dirt in the back of Waimanalo has been walled in on three sides by a stark white display bench backed in white. On display are some of the 400 or so specimen-quality bonsai in Liew's collection. On the fourth side of the field, a three-tiered row of more narrow benches awaits smaller bonsai. Behind this fourth wall stands the Koolau range. Mt. Olomana commands the view in the other direction.

For Liew, it is important to be able to view bonsai from near and far, and in the context of the environment. Many bonsai displays are housed in such cramped quarters it is impossible even to get far enough from the plants to take pictures, he said.

Liew bought the land in Waimanalo with the help of a loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency. The USDA gained possession of the land in a forfeiture proceeding and was evaluating business plans for the property.

The agency liked the cultural, artistic and tourism aspects of the bonsai center proposal, said Liew.

"Bonsai display center has been my dream for last 40 years. But this dream very difficult to come true," he said.

Liew has been collecting bonsai for 47 years, since his college days in Taiwan.

Born 68 years ago in northern China, he was raised and educated in Taiwan before moving to Hawaii 30 years ago.

Liew has been to bonsai gardens around the world, he couldn't believe there was no such resource in Hawaii.

Liew's plans for the Hawaii Bonsai Culture Center include the nursery, which already houses more than 500 plants from Taiwan, Hong Kong and, more recently, mainland China; a bonsai display area, phase one of which is

being constructed for next week's conference; a Chinese cultural museum to house artifacts he has collected; and bonsai classes.

"If you know something, if you don't teach this younger generation, this art gonna die. We want this art carried on," said Liew, who expects to have some time to share what he knows. Bonsai artists live long lives, he said.

"The bonsai make me healthy and make me long life," said Liew. "Bonsai will change people's attitude. You will have second thought before you do something. Bonsai will lead you that way."

Mike Uyeno echoed the therapeutic benefits of bonsai.

"It's very relaxing, you forget all about work," he said.

Uyeno was one of the founders of the Hawaii Bonsai Association and will lead a conference workshop on rock planting using *Juniperus chinensis* on pahoehoe lava.

While juniper is a bonsai standard, Uyeno said he likes to experiment with plants that have not traditionally been used in bonsai.

"We use a lot of different kinds now that we never used to use before," he said.

Two that are popular among Hawaii artists are ohia lehua and crown of thorns.

"(Ohia) has nice character to the trunk," said Uyeno. He added the plant is best harvested from a dry area. In wet areas, the plants tend to grow straight. "The plants start to struggle, then you get nice character to the trunk," he said.

Its flowers add to ohia's appeal and explain the attraction of crown of thorns as well. "The flower continuously blooms," he said. "Flowers and fruits are interesting to people," he said.

And there will be plenty to interest bonsai aficionados at next week's show.

Highlights will include a forest planting by Warren Hill, curator of the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum in Washington, D.C. (After the conference, Hill's creation will be housed at Liew's bonsai center); and a demonstration of Chinese Penjing techniques by Hu Yunhua, director of the Shanghai Garden Administration Bureau.

If you miss the tour to Dragon Nursery, it is open to the public by appointment. Call 259-6886.



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Stephanie Kendrick's gardening column runs Fridays in Today.
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