Why do bonsai? What meaning does it have? How do we explain its appeal?

Do we need to explain?”

We asked four experts to share their thoughts on bonsai and what it means to them. Read on for what they have to say about the timeless appeal of an art that bridges cultures and generations.
"I first became aware of the art of bonsai when China opened up to research and I began to conduct fieldwork in Tibet in the mid 1980s," writes Mel Goldstein. "I would go to Lhasa through Beijing and happened to stay at a hotel that had a garden with beautiful bonsai. I was greatly taken by the elegance and beauty of these trees, and started taking off a day coming in and going out from Beijing to look at penjing gardens such as the one at the Summer Palace."

Soon after Goldstein bought his first bonsai in the mid-1990s his interest turned to the older, more fully developed trees with beautiful trunks that he saw in China. That meant doing his own importing. "I started finding all the bonsai dealers in Beijing and bringing one or two back with me when I returned home. Pretty soon I was as excited about going to China to hunt for bonsai in Beijing as going to Tibet to do my fieldwork with a remote group of pastoral nomads."

Then Goldstein attended a demonstration by Japanese Satsuki expert Tatemori Gondo. (Satsuki is a kind of azalea that's popular in Japan as a bonsai plant.) He'd already been thinking about specializing in Satsuki azalea. Soon after the workshop he purchased his first Satsuki.

"Gradually I began to build a collection of Satsuki. As I got more knowledgeable, I started to improve my collection by buying exhibition quality 'finished trees' that already had a beautiful shape and required mainly fine-tuning and proper maintenance since trees are always growing and decisions have to made how to prune and what to keep, etc. There is a lot that has to be done or a beautiful tree can turn into an ugly bush very fast."

To learn more about Goldstein and his collection and how his connection to the University of Michigan inspired his passion for bonsai, read the full story on our blog.

The real sense of accomplishment for me is not just seeing a group of beautiful trees in my garden—it's also looking back at photos of them from 20 years ago to see how they've been transformed.

ABOVE: A bonsai tree transforms. The wonder of bonsai, explains Goldstein, “is that you can create such beauty from raw stock.” For the bonsai artist, the transformation of the bonsai over the years is a huge source of satisfaction. The tree on the left is a snapshot of one of Goldstein’s first Chinese elms, shown in 1997, when he first acquired it. On the right is the same tree in 2011, 14 years later. “Hard to believe it’s the same tree,” Goldstein says. ON THE COVER: One of Mel Goldstein’s Satsuki azaleas on display at Matthaei Botanical Gardens. (Photo by Michele Yanga; facing page: photo by Scott Soderberg.)
Why do we grow and care for bonsai? Local bonsai expert Jack Wikle writes about this mystery in his article “Thoughts on the Rewards of Growing Bonsai.” Wikle begins the essay with the question central to so many creative pursuits: why do I do this?

“Some people compose music. Others write prose or even poetry. Some paint pictures. In each instance these are ways of communicating, of reaching out to other people. But they are also ways of communicating with the individual ‘self,’ one’s inner being. Like other artists, the bonsai enthusiast is making his or her personal statement. But in this art the means of expression is the growing of a tree in a container —usually as a representation of trees in nature.

Bonsai is different from arts like painting and sculpture in that it is never finished. Change in the tree and the close involvement of the grower go on and on.

“Unquestionably the art of bonsai has at its foundation an appreciation of trees and of nature and of the cycles of nature. Yet, beyond being the grower’s statement about trees and nature, bonsai also say something positive about interaction between humans and nature. Gardens and bonsai come into being, by definition, when people and nature work together.”

Bonsai and its practice impact us on another level “as quiet physical and mental therapy for the grower,” Wikle continues. “Stress relief meditation and bonsai work both seem clearly to be flow activities as characterized by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow involves deeply focused and unself-conscious concentration on the work at hand, detachment from unrelated concerns, and distortion of one’s sense of time passing. Its result is a deep feeling of personal fulfillment. In the flow experience, the sense of personal growth and satisfaction comes more from effort and depth of involvement than it does from the effort’s product.

“One can say that the bonsai enthusiast, the bonsai artist if you will, helps trees grow but most of us recognize that the reverse of this statement is more accurate. Our trees are helping us grow.”

LEFT: Jack Wikle (left) and Cyril Grum work on a yew at Matthaei Botanical Gardens during a visit by nationally known bonsai artist David DeGroot. Both Wikle and Grum are longtime members of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society and are also founding donors of the Bonsai & Penjing Garden at Matthaei. ABOVE: A view of a larch forest bonsai Matthaei-Nichols purchased from Jack Wikle in 2012. Tamarack or larch (Larix laricina) is native to North America. Forest bonsai usually contain a single species. They are designed to convey the natural development of a stand of trees or forest. (Photo by Mackenzie King.)
Bonsai and penjing are nuanced expressions and explorations of layered relationships. Contemporary eyes may also see them as a kind of performance art. But what is the performance about? And for whom? And does it matter?

My first exposure to such questions was at a penjing studio in Jiangsu Province in the early 1990s. The studio master was working on vertical penjing (that is, the dish is mounted on the wall, and the trees grow from the crevices in the rock dish.) The teaching included that penjing (and bonsai) can be about human’s role in nature. In China, the presence of mountains, water, and plants is required. For millions of Chinese who toil in cities, however, it is often quite difficult to find these ancient roots of resonance and identity. Yet with this simple dish—intentionally adapted for an urban apartment balcony—one’s mind could travel.

From that day forward bonsai has been freed from my Western mind’s philosophical trap of “what does it really mean.” Instead of being a way to one true understanding, I have come to understand bonsai and penjing as nuanced explorations of layered relationships. Nature to humanity, master to apprentice (when is the tree the pupil, then the master?), youth to age. From this perspective, bonsai and penjing are about arriving at a level of mastery of life’s challenges with grace, dignity, and scars that hint of the untold struggles.

Bonsai is now an international art form. Having Dr. Goldstein’s profound range of canonical pieces entrusted to us provides the context and gravitas out of which our contemporary American pieces continue the deepening cultural expression. —Dr. David Michener, Matthaei-Nichols Curator

The incoming donation of trees from Dr. Melvyn Goldstein will transform our collection into one of the leading public examples of bonsai in the United States.

Bonsai in the West is still a young art compared to the thousands of years it has had to grow and evolve in the East. Early bonsai practitioners in the States began as hobbyists with very little formal training using anecdotal evidence to grow their trees. As a result, many of these trees fell short of the ideal bonsai structure and lack the refinement found in Japanese collections. Yet this speaks to the American spirit of jumping fearlessly into the unknown and remains an important milestone in the evolution of bonsai in the United States. The place of bonsai in America is reflected in the first bonsai plants donated to Matthaei-Nichols in 1977 from the Maurice Seevers estate.

With the return of increasing numbers of American bonsai apprentices from their time studying in Japan come the skills and techniques needed to create high-quality trees. Today in the United States there’s a new crop of American bonsai artists and teachers, some rising stars, some seasoned artists. People such as Ryan Neil, Bjorn Bjorholm, Bill Valvanis, and Michael Hagedorn, to name a few, demonstrate the growing American presence in the world of bonsai.

The incoming donation of trees from Dr. Melvyn Goldstein will serve as the mechanism to compare and contrast the American spirit of bonsai in the evolution of the original Seever’s collection with the refined collection of both imported and endemic species of American bonsai collector and artist Dr. Goldstein. —Carmen Leskoviansky, Matthaei-Nichols Collections Specialist

Read the full bonsai story on our blog: mbgna.umich.edu/blog/
Dear Friends,

Since the start of the Victors for Michigan Campaign eight years ago, you helped us raise a record-setting $9.6 million here at Matthaei-Nichols — and you have invested in a sustainable future.

The impact of your support has been truly transformative. Your gifts have created internships and field-based learning opportunities that engage the Leaders and Best in solving environmental problems. Together, we created homes here at U-M for internationally important plant collections. As the Campus Farm grew, your gifts helped food grown by students, feed students. You supported critical environmental research. And, you helped enhance our natural areas, garden spaces, and programs to engage an inclusive community. Ultimately, you helped define U-M as a leader of a more sustainable and just world.

Thank you for being a Victor for Michigan. Thank you for being a Victor for Nature!

Sincerely,

Meredith Olson, Director of Development

Introducing Frank Suárez-Román, Assistant Director of Annual Giving

Frank joined the team at Matthaei-Nichols this January as our new assistant director of annual giving. In this role, Frank manages our membership and tribute programs and plays a critical role in executing development events and programming. Frank has his MA in higher education from U-M, his MS in botany and plant pathology from Purdue University, and his BS in general biology from the University of Puerto Rico.

Hello everyone!

I am very excited to begin my journey at Matthaei-Nichols. As the new assistant director of annual giving, it is my personal mission to grow an inclusive membership community that supports the enjoyment and stewardship of our natural world. Our members directly support our mission by providing support for outreach, research, and education while maintaining our beautiful gardens and collections and conserving our natural areas. I look forward to connecting with you through upcoming events and future programming. I have a background in botany, so I am especially excited to engage in conversations with you about the beauty and impact plants have on our lives, as they sustain, heal, nourish, and delight us.

Thank you for your support!

Frank Suárez-Román, Assistant Director of Annual Giving
Long-Time Volunteers Made the Arboretum Ridge Trail Steps Happen

Take a walk as soon as you can in Nichols Arboretum to check out the ridge trail down to the Huron River. Many people, including interns, staff, and volunteers, worked on these handsome steps. In particular, two long-time volunteers, Tim Schaefer and Ric Vix, worked diligently over several years and in between other projects to complete the steps. In 2018 alone, Tim and Ric logged 1,120 volunteer hours between them. You'd think it would be fairly easy to install a set of steps. But with the ridge trail there were plenty of complicating factors, Tim explains. The winding, uneven grade dictated the placement and design. The landing area for each step was essentially unique. The previous log steps needed removing. Tree roots got in the way. The steps had to be set at just the right depth to avoid future erosion issues. Because the stair project began at the bottom of the ridge, the heavy wood stair treads had to be carried uphill by hand. In all, the 89 steps required 338 anchors. “The last one was the most gratifying,” notes Tim. If they learned anything from this project, he adds, it’s that “things are always more complex than they seem at first!” A special thanks also to Ford Motor Company, which provided funding for the ridge trail steps.

Peony Garden Bed Replanting Complete

The multi-year Peony Garden Initiative includes adding missing peonies from the original design and peonies of historical significance. As she wrapped up the peony planting last fall prior to her retirement, staffer Adrienne O’Brien reported that the herbaceous peony beds are now all filled with approximately 400 pairs of heirloom (pre-1950) cultivars. Four new beds on the perimeter have over 200 new tree and Itoh peonies. Many staff members, volunteers, and students contributed to the Peony Garden effort. The Nichols Arboretum Peony Garden will be in beautiful shape for its 2022 centennial celebration.

Visit the garden this spring as it blooms Memorial Day to mid-June. And check our peony website for regular bloom updates and other peony-related information: peony.mbgna.umich.edu.

Shakespeare Season: Twelfth Night

The nineteenth season of Shakespeare in the Arb brings back Twelfth Night to the Arboretum. It’s only the second showing of this play, last produced in 2009. Shakespeare’s tale of love and identity, mistaken and otherwise, is directed by Kate Mendeloff, Graham Atkin, and Carol Gray. Performance dates are Thurs.-Sun., June 6-9, 13-16, 20-23. Matthaei-Nichols members can reserve tickets online and pick them up at will call before the show. Look for information, ticket prices, and more on our website in May: mbgna.umich.edu.

Transitions

Frank Suárez-Román joined Matthaei-Nichols Arboretum as assistant director of annual giving in January. In this role, Frank manages our membership and tribute programs and plays a critical role in executing development events and overseeing the stewardship of annual gifts. Frank has a master’s in higher education from U-M and also spent time working in the development office at the School of Education. Frank also has a master’s in botany and plant pathology from Purdue University, and his bachelor’s in general biology from the University of Puerto Rico. Nadirah Hope joined Matthaei-Nichols in February as an administrative assistant. Nadirah has several years working in administration at the University of Michigan, both on the Ann Arbor campus and at Michigan Medicine. She graduated with an associate’s in aviation business administration from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Fla. in 2000 and has nearly completed her bachelor’s in economics with a minor in mathematics from Eastern Michigan University. Welcome also our seasonal staff of technicians, some returning from previous intern or seasonal positions here: Kayla Wanous and Patti Dale, horticulture; Chad Machinski, woody plants and trails; and Murphy Harrington, natural areas stewardship.
Super Dedicated Volunteers Mark Thirty Years of Plant Sales
By Christine Chessler-Stull, Volunteer Coordinator

It’s a blustery, late-winter day outside, but as I wander through the warm greenhouse, the sight and smell of flowers almost tricks me into thinking it’s spring. A team of dedicated volunteers led by Adrienne O’Brien, Matthaei-Nichols Horticulturist retiree, artfully pots up creations for the upcoming Mother’s Day sale. Impressively, many on this volunteer team have been coming back annually to work on this particular project for the past 30 years! When I asked the volunteers what keeps them coming back, they all agree that it’s about their fellow volunteers, the joy of experiencing spring in winter in the greenhouse, the learning opportunity, and how the work and the sale benefit Matthaei-Nichols.

Volunteers also work closely with staff to determine the types of plants, containers, and arrangement patterns used. O’Brien mentioned that flower choices are selected by looking through up-to-date catalogs for a bead on what’s new in plants. A mix of sun and shade, plus the proverbial “spiller, thriller, filler” plants are the types most often used. Volunteer Mona Pancioli elaborated, “Our containers are unique—not something you can find at a big box store or nursery. The catalogs help us keep up with plant trends.”

Volunteers at Matthaei-Nichols contribute many hours to the care and beauty of our plants and flowers, and the plant sales are no exception! You can take home one of their beautifully crafted creations by shopping the Mother’s Day Plant Sale on Saturday and Sunday, May 11 and 12.

Many on the team have been coming back for 30 years

Want to be part of a similar story? Matthaei-Nichols welcomes volunteers to help our efforts. For more information about our many volunteer opportunities contact Volunteer Coordinator Christine Chessler-Stull: 734.647.8528; cmchess@umich.edu. Or visit our website mbgna.umich.edu.
### Spring-summer 2019 community/adult programs, classes, and events

#### MAY

**Mon., May 6, 7 pm**
**Workshop: Making Moth Repellent Sachets**
Honey Bee Conservancy
Ann Arbor Backyard Beekeepers
Local nurse owner Vince St. Marie discusses this well-known topic and its implications for beekeepers.

**Wed., May 8, 6:45 pm**
**2019 Stiltgrass Season: Learn to Identify and Control this Invasive Species**
Wild Ones Ann Arbor
A presentation on how to identify and control invasive stiltgrass, which becomes a monoculture within a year or two, stifling our native plants.

**Tues., May 14, 6:30 pm**
**Identification and Management of Africanized Honey Bees (Killer Bees)**
Ann Arbor Backyard Beekeepers
Local nurse owner Vince St. Marie discusses this well-known topic and its implications for beekeepers.

**Wed., May 15, 7:30 pm**
**Saving the Endangered Manatee**
Washtenaw Audubon Society
A presentation on manatees by U-M Dearborn faculty member Katherine LaComome. Join us as we learn what problems these endangered animals face and work that is being done to help them.

**Thurs., May 16, 1-2:30 pm**
**Ikebana: Japanese Flower Arranging**
Ann Arbor Ikebana Int’l.
Chapter
Create your own Ikebana arrangement with help from certified instructor: $20 fee covers flowers and instructor. Email 2 weeks prior for e-invite. Attendance limited to 25. a2ikebanagan@gmail.com.

### Spring Plant Sales at Matthaei-Nichols

Three great weekends you won’t want to miss. Join us this May and June and help support the Arb and Gardens, Campus Farm, and the U-M Sustainable Food Program.

**SPECIAL MEMBER HOUR: Mother’s Day Weekend Plant Sale**
Sat., May 11, 9-10 am
Matthaei-Nichols members enjoy a special pre-sale discount this morning. Join us for coffee, tea, and breakfast munchies, then shop the sale of containers and hanging baskets. Receive an additional 10% off purchases (20% total).

**Mother’s Day Weekend Plant Sale**
Sat. & Sun., May 11 & 12, 10 am-4:30 pm
Hanging basket and container plantings—perfect for Mom!—grown and designed on site by staff and volunteers. All proceeds benefit Matthaei-Nichols.

**Spring Art Market**
Sat., May 11, 9 am-4:30 pm
Local artisans and craftspeople offer their unique items for sale. A great opportunity to discover the perfect, one-of-a-kind gift for Mom. (No member discount on merchandise.)

**SPECIAL MEMBER HOUR: Kitchen Favorites Sale**
Sat., May 18, 9-10 am
Matthaei-Nichols members enjoy a special pre-sale discount this morning. Join us for coffee, tea, and breakfast munchies, then shop the sale of herbs and vegetables. Receive an additional 10% off purchases (20% total).

**Kitchen Favorites Sale**
Sat. & Sun., May 18 & 19, 10 am-4:30 pm
A sale of heirloom vegetables and herbs grown by U-M student volunteers. Proceeds benefit the Campus Farm and Matthaei-Nichols Plus, Herb Study Group on hand with herb samples and information on growing herbs.

**Herbs with Madolyyn**
Sat. & Sun., May 18 & 19, 10 am-4:30 pm:
Herb Study Group president Madolyn Kaminski answers questions about herbs and plants during the Kitchen Favorites sale.

**MEMORIAL DAY-MID-JUNE: Nichols Arboretum Peony Garden Season. Check our peony website for updates:**
peonymgbna.umich.edu.

**NOTE:** Call ahead or check our website in advance to confirm programming. 734.647.7600; mgbna.umich.edu.

### Spring-summer 2019 community/adult programs, classes, and events

#### JUNE

**Mon., June 11, 6:30 pm**
**A Backyard Beekeeper’s Guide to the Small Hive Beetle**
Ann Arbor Backyard Beekeepers
U-M faculty advisor, German instructor, and beekeeper Andrei Miklus discusses the small hive bee, a beekeeping pest now present in many U.S. states.

**$ Shakespeare in the Arb: Twelfth Night**
Thurs.-Sun., June 6-9, 13-16, 20-23, 6:30 pm
Now in its 19th year, Shakespeare in the Arb is directed by Kate Mendeloff of the U-M Residential College. Carol Gray, and Graham Atkin, and performed by U-M students and community members. Members receive a discount on tickets. Info and ticket prices: mbgna.umich.edu.

**Hosta Stock Exchange**
Hosta Hybridizer Group
Trade your hosta breeding stock or participate in two hosta seedling competitions and share your photographs.

**Wed., June 6, 6:30-7:30 pm**
**Hosta Leaf Show and Auction**
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Hosta Leaf Show and Auction
Join the group for a hosta leaf show that allows plants to be showcased by their owners. Following the annual auction at 1 pm of donated hosta plants.

**Mon., June 10, 11 am**
**New Age Terrarium Culture**
Great Lakes Judging Orhids
A presentation by Detroit Blight Busters, a community-based nonprofit housing corporation that works with over 9000 volunteers on clean up and rebuilding projects.

**Sun., July 21, 10 am-2 pm**
**Hosta Leaf Show and Auction**
Hosta Hybridizer Group
Join the group for a hosta leaf show that allows plants to be showcased by their owners. Following the annual auction at 1 pm of donated hosta plants.

### AUGUST

**Wed., Aug. 7, 6-7:30 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. Follow the discussion, participants will gather for a tour by Matthaei-Nichols Director Bob Grese of the Great Lakes Gardens.

**Mon., Aug. 13, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. The featured program this month is about herbs and plants during the Kitchen Favorites sale.

**Mon., Aug. 13, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. Designed for learning skills for continued health and well-being. Info and to register: 734.936.8803.

**Wed., Aug. 15, 6 pm**
**The Future of A2 Wild Ones**
Wild Ones Ann Arbor
Join us for a discussion about the future of Ann Arbor Wild Ones. Following the discussion, participants will gather for a tour by Matthaei-Nichols Director Bob Grese of the Great Lakes Gardens.

**Mon., Aug. 19, 7 pm**
**Hosta Leaf Show and Auction**
Hosta Hybridizer Group
Join the group for a hosta leaf show that allows plants to be showcased by their owners. Following the annual auction at 1 pm of donated hosta plants.

**Sat., Aug. 24, 9 am**
**Wildflower Week: Mastering Nature’s Art**
Great Lakes Judging Orchids
A presentation by a master gardener on the art of growing wildflowers and Native Plants in Michigan.

**Mon., Aug. 26, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. Designed for learning skills for continued health and well-being. Info and to register: 734.936.8803.

**Sun., Sept. 15, 11 am**
**Tradewind Day: Home to the Manatee**
Great Lakes Judging Orchids
Join the group for a hosta leaf show that allows plants to be showcased by their owners. Following the annual auction at 1 pm of donated hosta plants.

**Mon., Sept. 16, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. Designed for learning skills for continued health and well-being. Info and to register: 734.936.8803.

**Mon., Sept. 16, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. The featured program this month is about herbs and plants during the Kitchen Favorites sale.

**Mon., Sept. 16, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. Designed for learning skills for continued health and well-being. Info and to register: 734.936.8803.

**Mon., Oct. 21, 7 pm**
**Silk Flower Making**
**Great Lakes Judging Orchids**
A presentation by a master gardener on the art of growing wildflowers and Native Plants in Michigan.

**Mon., Oct. 28, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. Designed for learning skills for continued health and well-being. Info and to register: 734.936.8803.

**Mon., Nov. 18, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. Designed for learning skills for continued health and well-being. Info and to register: 734.936.8803.

**Mon., Dec. 9, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. The featured program this month is about herbs and plants during the Kitchen Favorites sale.

**Mon., Dec. 16, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. Designed for learning skills for continued health and well-being. Info and to register: 734.936.8803.

**Mon., Dec. 16, 7 pm**
**Catching Your Breath**
**Mil Alzheimer’s Disease Center**
A free monthly program for caregivers of adults with memory loss. Designed for learning skills for continued health and well-being. Info and to register: 734.936.8803.