

Museum of mini trees

Homestyle By Mike Leidemann

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Bonsai, the Chinese art of artistically cultivated potted plants, is in the news this week with an international convention and a new museum opening here. And yes, Chinese is right.

While many people associate bonsai with Japan, the tradition goes back much further into Asian culture, said Walter Liew, who is taking the wraps off his new Hawai'i Bonsai Cultural Center in Waimanalo today for those attending the annual meeting of Bonsai Clubs International.

The Chinese already had a centuries-old tradition of creating miniature landscapes in a pot when visiting Japanese monks brought the idea home from China in the 13th century.

Of course, the Japanese took the idea and ran with it.

"We must really be thankful to Japan for preserving the tradition and helping to spread it to Hawai'i and the rest of the world," said Liew, a retired furniture store owner who has spent much of his life nurturing and adding to a collection of bonsai that rivals any other in America. "In many ways, the Japanese have done a better job of keeping Chinese traditions alive than China has."

Bonsai is just one part of what the Chinese call penjing, or potted landscapes, Liew said. The Chinese art includes ikebana (cut flower arrangements), suiseki (water and stone arrangements), as well as bonsai, he said.

For the Chinese, the essence of penjing is a union of artist and plant, human creativity and natural elements, coming together to make a work of art. The goal isn't just to re-create a natural scenery but to capture its essence and spirit. Penjing artists draw extensively on China's great philosophical traditions of Taoism and Buddhism and align themselves with the other arts, such as landscape painting and poetry.

Liew grew up in northern China and moved to Taiwan when he was 13.

It was there, he said, that he became interested in penjing and began collecting. Through his years in Hawaii as a businessman and teacher since 1976, Liew expanded his collection, both by growing bonsai in his Wai'alaie Iki yard, and later by purchasing plants and other penjing pieces on many trips back to Taiwan and China.

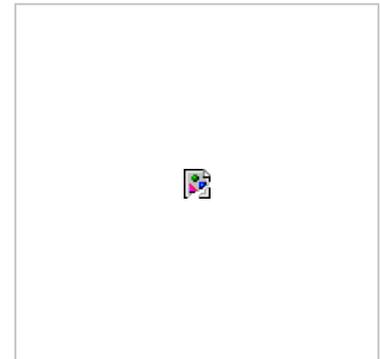
With a collection that he says is the equal of the two largest in the nation—at the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Pacific Rim Bonsai Collection in Tacoma, Wash.—he's ready to share it with others.

For the last 18 months, he and his wife Ann, with the help of a loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, have been developing the bonsai center and the adjacent Dragon Garden commercial bonsai nursery on 20 acres of leased land in Waimanalo.

Among the first visitors to see the exhibit will be 300 people from 14 nations and 20 states attending the convention of the Bonsai Clubs International, which begins today at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel, said Warren Yamamoto, president of the Hawai'i Bonsai Association.

The convention features demonstrations by bonsai artists from Hawai'i, the Mainland, Japan and China, as well as displays of local bonsai, workshops on particular plants and a tour of Liew's new center.

Among the speakers is Hu Yunhua, the head of the Shanghai Garden Administration Bureau and a bonsai author and lecturer, who will speak on penjing theory and techniques, Yamamoto said.



Members of Hawaii's bonsai community have been volunteering for the past several months to help Liew ready the center, Yamamoto said.

Liew plans to show hundreds of Chinese- and Japanese-style bonsai, as well as other penjing pieces, all outdoors in the shadow of the Ko'olau and borrowing a spectacular view of Olomana in the distance. The collection includes many styles of classical bonsai, from formal uprights and full umbrellas to those emphasizing interesting roots or cascading foliage.

Liew said admission to the museum will be \$15 and, at least for now, by appointment. The cost will be deducted from any purchase a visitor makes in the adjacent Dragon Garden nursery, which holds thousands of plants, pots and rocks that Liew has brought back from Taiwan and China. Eventually, Liew also plans on displaying his personal collection of Chinese furniture and other arts in a museum building on the Waimanalo grounds.

For much of the 20th century, foreign occupation, civil war and the Communist cultural revolution helped decimate many of China's old penjing collections and contributed to the loss of traditional techniques and insights. In the past 20 years, however, there's been something of a penjing revival, Liew said.

"It's very strong among the well-to-do people as well as artists and scholars," he said.

Prices at Liew's nursery range from about \$25 to the don't-even-bother-to-ask category.

"Money can't buy time—except in bonsai," Liew said. "If you've got enough money, you can buy 25 years of bonsai work in one minute."

If you don't fall into that category, Liew recommends taking a bonsai class, starting small with quality plants and reaping the reward of creating your own potted landscape over the rest of your life.

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