



June Mtg: Bonsai Challenge

by Joshua Diaz

Wednesday, June 24, 2026 at 7:00pm

The Bonsai Challenge is back, and the excitement is building! With the combined energy and talent of the three clubs—Kusamura Bonsai Club, Midori Bonsai Club, and Sei Boku Bonsai Kai, this year's event promises to be a fantastic one!

For the Secret Material Challenge, participants will have the opportunity to work with carefully selected conifers that have been cultivated and strengthened specifically for this event. We wanted material that would appeal to a wide range of enthusiasts while remaining practical for shohin and chuhin development. Each tree is over 20 years old, offering plenty of character and potential, and a simple care guide will be provided to help participants get the most from their material.

What makes this challenge special isn't just the competition, it's the creativity, camaraderie, and shared passion that bring our bonsai community together. Watching each team transform the same starting material into something completely unique is always inspiring, and we can't wait to see the remarkable trees that emerge this year.

Once the styling is complete, the trees will be raffled off, giving attendees the chance to take home a one of a kind conifer shaped by the hands and vision of fellow bonsai enthusiasts.

As we prepare for another fantastic challenge, we're also looking ahead. We're actively searching for future material and exploring new ways to make the event even more enjoyable and rewarding. If you have ideas for sourcing quality material, suggestions for improving the challenge, or ways to strengthen our bonsai community, we'd love to hear from you. Every contribution helps us grow and ensures that each year is even better than the last.

SBBK Calendar

- Jun 13-14** Sei Boku Bonsai Kai Show
San Mateo Garden Center
605 Parkside Way, San Mateo
Sat & Sun 10:00 am - 4:00 pm
Demonstrations 1:00 - 3:00 pm
- Jun 20-21** Valley Bonsai Society 17th Annual Show
Alden Lane Nursery
981 Alden Lane, Livermore
Sat & Sun 10:00 am- 4:00 pm
- Jul 1-5** Marin Bonsai Club: Small Trees with Big Stories
Marin County Fair — Exhibit Hall
10 Avenue of the Flags, San Rafael
Sat & Sun 11:00 am - 6:00 pm
- Jul 8** East Bay Bonsai Society Annual Auction
Lakeside Garden Center
666 Bellevue Ave, Oakland
Preview at 6:00 - 9:30 pm

Refreshment Reminder

Jun Mtg	Jul Mtg	Aug Mtg
Jose Sandoval	Bob & Joyce Shatsky	Zake Stahl
Keith Schmidt	Christian Sierra	Caleb Stewart

Please find a replacement if unable to bring refreshments as scheduled. Refer to the SBBK roster.

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President's Message

By Mike Rosenthal

Hello All,

We are all excited and busy getting ready for the SBBK Annual Show on June 13 and 14 at the San Mateo Garden Center. I am expecting that all of you, if in town, will be joining your colleagues to participate. This has always been a great event to show off our club and the artistic abilities of our members. This year we are featuring our own sensei members as key-note presenters – Steve Jang and Valerie Monroe. Also, we have asked Jonas Dupuich to provide a critique of our show display on Sunday morning beginning at 8:30. All are encouraged to attend and learn. Those of us with trees in the display will come with “thick skin” and a lot of humility – some more than others. A new addition to our program will be the trees-in-training or development that will allow members who have trees that may not be quite ready for our main display, but well on their way to show how they are progressing.

We are also excited about the inception of our Sei Boku Bonsai Kai Scholarship Program. This new offering will provide the opportunity for members to participate in programs for furthering their bonsai

related education and skills with the support of our club. Each year a member will be selected from those applying to receive a grant for their own selected activity. Michael Fernandez and his committee have prepared an introduction to this program along with the application requirements that will be available soon.

On May 24, Michael Greenstein, President of Kusamura, held a superb educational program – a Bonsai Introductory Seminar – geared to those SBBK members beginning their adventure in bonsai (photos on page 6). Michael is an exceptional teacher and those of us who attended benefitted tremendously. Not only were several of our newer members present but also Valerie Monroe, Milton Chang and me, who all agreed that the time was so well spent. Thank you Michael.

I look forward to seeing both our old & new members and guests at our show.

Summer is nearly here – water, water, water.

Happy times!!!!!!

Mike

Kusamono Corner

by Barbara Phillips

This article will explore kusamono, an art form that is very closely allied with bonsai. The somewhat vague translation of kusamono is “grass thing”, but a clearer definition comes from the Australian bonsai artist Hugh Grant who calls it “the herbaceous counterpart to the practice of bonsai.” Herbaceous plants differ from trees in that the stems of herbaceous plants have little or no wood and reach their full maturity over one or several seasons unlike trees that take many years to become fully mature.

There are two ways that kusamono are typically displayed. One is as a companion (accent) plant with a bonsai tree, in Japanese called “shitakusa.” The other is as a stand alone arrangement that is displayed on its own. These stand alone compositions are what most people think of as kusamono.

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Bonsai Viewing Guide for Visitors

by Michael Wei

I was very fortunate that my first in-person bonsai show was the 2022 Pacific Bonsai Expo. Since then, I had gleaned what to look for and appreciate in the art of bonsai. Thanks to Jonas Dupuich's [Bonsai Tonight](#) and SBBK Show Display presentations, and Valerie's mentoring, I wanted to reciprocate to visitors with their first bonsai show. It is a simple viewing guide that may spark further interest to learn more. Bonsai is to be appreciated, if you have space or not, have a single tree or none. We can all appreciate music, art, or a fine meal if we see how they are made or why they were made, while not having to play, paint or cook. So this visitor guide can complement your beautiful trees and accents. We hope that your viewing experience sparks awe and a smile, celebrating with your club-mates on years of tree development and refinement.

We encourage you to participate in Jonas' Exhibit Critique on Sunday morning.



May Mtg Recap: Specific Species Workshop

by Mike Rosenthal

Our SBBK May club meeting featured four of our member Senseis – Valerie Monroe, Steve Jang, Steve Iwaki, and John “JT” Thompson – each heading up a station with 5-6 members working on their trees. A large variety of trees were in evidence including junipers, boxwoods, pines, redwoods and more.

There were over 40 members at the meeting and all appeared to enjoy the program, whether participating or observing. A hearty thanks to our Senseis for always pitching in when needed.



First Tuesday Workshop

by Val Monroe

Mini Talk - Pine Decandling

If you've been attending the first Tuesday workshops lately, you know we're learning about bonsai in a fun, fast paced, dare I say, rollicking atmosphere.

We're all coming together to discover new aspects of our art form. Sometimes we disagree, most of the time we try to hash out the best way forward for everybody's tree. Thank you for participating in these special sessions either as a student or a teacher. I think everyone has the potential to keep on learning new things, whether you're a beginner or going on your fortieth year.

I'm very grateful to my teaching partners that are willing to come and contribute to the crazy energy of the workshop. Thank you to Richard Phillips, Maryann Hinden, Jerry Carpenter, and Steve Iwaki for your knowledge and encouragement.

At the June first Tuesday, we went over the thought process of summer pine decandling. It can be somewhat confusing when you're doing it for the first time, but will gradually become second nature as you continue every year.

In a nutshell, you will be cutting off all of the new spring growth on your Japanese red and black pines. Where it gets tricky is when to cut; the most important factor is where you live and the temperature. The cooler the climate, the sooner (like end of May) your cutting starts. The hotter your climate, the later (like early July) your cutting takes place.

I recommend looking into writings by Jonas Dupuich and Michael Hagedorn if you are interested in all of the many nuances involved.

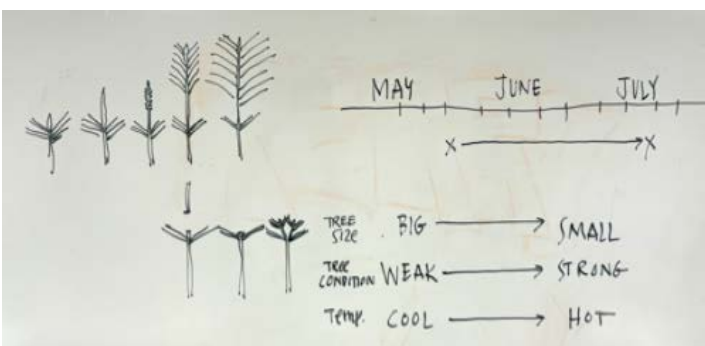


July mini talk will be on rejuvenating your soil surface. Maryann will show how to cover a surface with yamagoke, and Val will renew a surface with bonsai mix.

August mini talk will be on two types of bonsai styles and how to prune and style branches for each look.

Some notes from the Pine Decandling Mini Talk:

- The goal with decandling is to develop shorter needles, encourage ramification and back-budding.
- The best time to do this depends on many factors: your local climate (colder or hotter), age of the tree, strength/weakness of your trees, etc.
- The normal window is between May to mid-July:
- The earlier you decandle will give more time to grow (or grow more than desired that season). Decandle earlier for slower development (colder, weaker trees, bigger or older trees) and later for faster growth (warmer, stronger trees, smaller or younger trees).
- Even within a tree you may have stronger (longer) and weaker (shorter) candles. These may also be worked on over a few weeks—weaker candles one week, and stronger candles the following week(s).
- Hold off fertilizing the month following decandling to prevent aggressive growth and longer needles.
- New buds should emerge around mid-August.
- Leave the trees alone until Nov to Feb, when we thin needles.



Why do we call the small arrangements displayed with bonsai trees “companion plants?” Ideally, it’s because the companion is giving a hint about the habitat of the tree when it is in Nature. For example, what do you see when you look down at the base of the trees in a redwood forest? You see ferns, redwood sorrel, etc. So if you were creating a companion planting for your redwood bonsai, including ferns, sorrel, etc. would be helping make the connection between the tree and the world it lives in. The tree is still the star of the show, but the companion has an important support role. This same habitat could also be created as a stand alone kusamono, without a tree. The intent here is to focus attention exclusively on the understory plants as worthy of contemplation on their own.

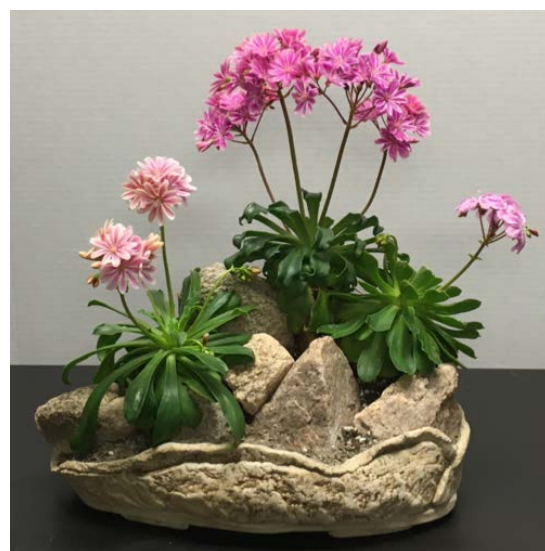
Like a companion plant, a kusamono can be created to represent a natural habitat such as a meadow, a bog, or a forest understory. Another category of kusamono is to show a particular season or the cycle of the seasons as plants renew themselves annually. Of course, both objectives can be achieved in the same design.

There are several basic requirements to create a kusamono. First, plants must have compatible horticultural requirements for light, temperature, and water. The plants should be appropriate for the seasons or the habitat being represented. And finally, there should be a variety of colors, textures, and sizes that both compliment and contrast depending on the design intention.

The benefits of creating kusamono are many including that they can be created and enjoyed in a much shorter period of time than a bonsai tree. A kusamono collection can be kept in a relatively small space such as a balcony, deck, patio or porch. And the living material is readily available and usually inexpensive.

Perhaps the most significant benefit is that kusamono allows the creator much more freedom of individual expression than traditional

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bonsai. For example, a wider variety of containers is not only permitted, but encouraged. For the most part, matching the plants and container in a kusamono doesn't require the same degree of consideration as it does for a bonsai tree. Containers that would be unsuitable for a tree can be perfect for a kusamono.

Creating either a companion or a kusamono can help develop your eye for the natural world and increase your enjoyment both when you are out in Nature as well as when you make your own small piece of it.

As Norio Kobayashi, one of the founders of the Kokufu exhibition wrote 75 years ago "Even field grasses may be treated as bonsai, for after all, appreciation of the beautiful is within the mind of the person who looks at it."

Future articles in this series will discuss how to get started in the satisfying experience of creating your own kusamono.

President's Message continued from page 2



Michael Greenstein at his Bonsai Introductory Seminar

In Loving Memory of Nunzio (Norm) Sorce

by Debbie Diaz

This cascade style Boxwood was given to me in November 2025 after the original owner, Nunzio (Norm) Sorce, passed away in September of 2025. We had known each other since I was four years old, and he was my next-door neighbor. Norm introduced me to bonsai a week before he passed away.



Norm joined Sei Boku Bonsai Kai in the 1980's, and that is when he acquired this [boxwood] tree. Norm was an active club member up until 2023, at which time he became a full-time caregiver for his wife. Additionally, he was in his nineties and found it difficult to care for his bonsai collection.

When I took possession of the tree it was not very healthy. The leaves were orange and yellow and it needed TLC. Normally in the winter months you do not fertilize bonsai trees, however, this tree required feeding, watering, and trimming. With much care and repotting in February 2026, the tree is now thriving. This tree as well as many other things will always be a remembrance of Norm.



Reigning Monarchs

by Mitu Bhargava

Everybody knows that the world's flora and fauna are under siege and that California is struggling. With climate change, our fires are hotter, bigger and more frequent, and denuding entire landscapes. Then, there is the urbanization effect and large scale clearing of valuable habitat.

I've heard long time residents of our sub-division bemoan the rapid disappearance of monarchs, dens of coyotes, raccoons, skunks and other beasties. These are our charismatic friends. We are, in truth, losing thousands of species as we wreck the food chain. It is possible for us to offer our local pollinators and beasties some reprieve. Little bowls of fresh water will bring wildlife, I can vouch for this. But, we can do better.

Planting CA keystone species and minimizing the use of pesticide and fertilizer is the first step to restoring habitat. There is a country-wide campaign under way to do this by planting keystone species in parking strips. Easy, cheap, minimum water needs and low maintenance.

<https://youtu.be/PKe0UzqazuU?si=OOujRFPc3eYyIFUj>



I'm rooting for him to win a Nobel.

This last month, we noticed little creatures roaming our narrow leaf milkweed. Great excitement ensued as some wandering western monarch butterfly had found our little patch in this suburban jungle. We set up a little incubation unit to keep the caterpillars and chrysalises safe and so far we have released three resplendent monarch butterflies, with at least five more to follow. We are both exhilarated and humbled by nature's magnificence.

If you plant it, they will come. Ask me questions.



New SBBK Calendar of Events

2026

June	Club Show: demos by Valerie M. & Steve J. Mtg: Bonsai Challenge (Josh & Gio)
July	Mtg: Wiring with JT, hands-on
Aug	Mtg: Guest: Pedro Morales—Tropicals
Sep	Mtg: Green Elephant Sale & Auction
Oct	Mtg: Peter Macasieb - Shohin
Nov	Mtg: Business Meeting, Fall Clean-up Workshop
Dec	Holiday Party

Welcoming New Members



- Jeff Whitnack
- Christian Mattei
- Dawn Graves

Thanks to all the volunteers in promoting SBBK and our June Show at local events, like the College of San Mateo Farmers' Market shown below. Thanks to Jenny Tsao and Linda Kuhli, Cath Tierney and Bill McDonald.



Steve Iwaki will have club name badges, that we encourage you to wear at the show and club meetings. Contact Steve at steve@iwakibonsai.com to get yours.

Visit us on the web at <https://seibokubonsai.org/>
or at <https://facebook.com/seiboku.bonsaikai>
or at <https://instagram.com/seibokubonsai>



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