

Bonsai nursery owner thinks small

By JANA SARGENT
Capital Press

Mirai Bonsai nursery, workshop and school in St. Helens, Ore., melds the 2,000-year-old Japanese tradition with a unique Ameri-

canized look to create living works of art.

Ryan Neil, owner of Mirai Bonsai, is one of the U.S. pioneers of bonsai as an art form. He created the nursery in 2010.

Bonsai is the practice of

creating a miniature but realistic representation of nature in the form of a tree.

Americanized bonsai uses the techniques and principles from traditional Japanese bonsai but portrays American landscapes using native materials.

Neil said using trees that people know makes the context easier to identify with and relate to.

Before starting Mirai Bonsai, Neil studied under Masahiko Kimura, a bonsai master in Japan, for eight years.

“My breakthrough came when I realized there is a lack of connection in the Japanese model,” Neil said. “With our trees, people are saying ‘I’ve seen that before, I’ve been there.’ It helps them appreciate bonsai in a whole new way.”

Mirai Bonsai’s main flagship trees are Ponderosa pines, Rocky Mountain junipers, Sierra junipers, Douglas firs, Colorado spruces, Engelmann spruces and California junipers. Neil said the nursery is conifer-specialized and focuses on native Western hearty species. Bonsai trees range in price from \$800 up, according to Mirai’s website.

Neil said his company is paving a new direction for bonsai in America.

Last fall, Neil brought his living art to the Portland Art Museum in what curators said was the most highly attended

private exhibit in their memory.

Neil and his wife, Chelsea, envisioned the exhibition, called the Artisans Cup, as an exhibition of American Bonsai featuring 70 trees from across North America.

“I’ve never seen anything like (The Artisans Cup),” Neil said. “We tapped into a new way of approaching bonsai in the way we presented the art form and allowed people to view and experience it.”

It also opened the door for Neil to exhibit his work at the Portland Japanese Gardens, the Wieden+Kennedy advertising agency and several artistic installations around the country.

Neil studied horticultural science at California Polytechnic State University

Turn to BONSAI, Page 7

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