

'I work with the tree and follow its way'

Astoria man practices the refined hobby of bonsai

Story and photos by
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The Japanese art of bonsai goes back some 1,500 years. Miniature trees are shaped and grown to recreate nature in small containers for both meditation and the personal satisfaction of the artist.

Astoria man Tyson Spaan became part of that tradition 20 years ago and now has a miniature forest of almost 50 trees on the deck of his house. For Spaan it began not in the distant past, but with Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees — the bonsai shop in "Karate Kid, Part III."

"I got hooked when I was a kid," he says. "It was my very first sight of one." He next saw a bonsai in a small nursery with a section devoted to the miniature trees, and his future was fixed: "I started dreaming. I knew for sure that I had to get one. I had to be with bonsai trees."

It was only a dream for several years, because he didn't know how to go about training a tree to a small pot. On his first attempt, at the age of 12, Spaan tried to create a tree like those he had seen in the nursery, but eventually the tree died. Another attempt made that year still survives in his collection.

Bonsai trees need close attention and consistent water-

ing, something that's difficult if you're going to high school, so Spaan's hobby was on hiatus for those years. Then, about the age of 20, bonsai trees became something that, if not quite an obsession, "required an endless amount of work."

Spaan began collecting books about bonsai and absorbing every word. He subscribed to Bonsai Focus magazine. He takes a workshop every year or two, each time getting a starter tree and training from a bonsai master.

"In 12 years I've gone from knowing nearly nothing to what I know now," he says.

Despite Spaan's study of the subject, his expertise has been gained primarily from practice. "I learn a lot each season," he says. "It's a slow road, but a good one. I've been improving every season and so have the trees."

Spaan mixes the soil from components he orders on the internet, a major portion of which is Japanese Akadama soil, which promotes water retention and root growth. All of his trees are repotted every spring ("a chance to root prune"), and new growth is pinched ("to keep things in trim"). During summer there is some trimming and a lot of watering. Fall is a time to "catch up with pruning," Spaan says, "and it's a great



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time to wire the trees, especially deciduous trees, because you can see what you're doing with the branches."

The wiring of trees is often misunderstood by those new to bonsai.

"Every tree has at least some wiring at the beginning," Spaan says. "Then I remove the wire, and the tree is formed with pruning."

He seeks a natural look: "I work with the tree and follow its way and try to make it even more beautiful," he says.

The trees are what it is all about for Spaan. "It's a personal love of nature that compels me to do it, to keep them thriving." He points to one of his bonsai, "Look at how happy this tree is."



Tyson Spaan prunes an American larch tree in the bonsai tradition at his home in Astoria.