

OutPOST

LIFE & ARTS

A new 'leaf' on life

Bonsai tradition brought new joy to Hong Lee after losing his job

By JAMES JACKSON
For the Post

About 17 years ago, Hong Lee was in a dark place after his life took an unexpected turn for the worse.

It was 1999 and the automotive parts company Lee had worked for over the past decade was suddenly sold. He lost his job as operations manager — along with 28 co-workers. He was devastated.

"I was sulking, and I needed something to get my mind off of that traumatic experience," said Lee, 67.

A walk through Conestoga Mall one day set him on a path that changed his life forever. He came upon a display for bonsai trees, and the rest, according to Lee, is history.

The meditative and creative outlet he found in caring for the small, delicate trees was "better than any sedative," he said, and soon his home was full of them. At one time, more than 150 trees were living in his garage, living room and basement.

They were a life saver for Lee.

"What it did for me was it took me out of that stupid state I was in and took me to somewhere I'd never been. It was peace of mind," he said.

The tradition of bonsai trees — Japanese for "planting in tray" — dates back more than 1,000 years, and what is now typically associated with Japanese culture actually began in China, a practice called penjing.

From the sixth century on, embassy personnel and Buddhist monks from Japan travelled to China and returned with souvenirs, including the small, decorative trees.

"From that point on, I would say the Japanese have done great things with the art of bonsai," said Lee, whose parents immigrated to Toronto from China in 1959. He's lived in

Waterloo Region since 1962.

"Some people might not call it art, but it is definitely an art form," Lee said.

In Japan, the trees have become family heirlooms and are passed down from generation to generation. It's common to find bonsai trees that are hundreds of years old inside Japanese homes, Lee said.

"The offspring would be taught how to take care of these trees and how to produce a good bonsai," he said.

Lee and his wife, Juliet, have a daughter and a son, as well as one grandchild, but none of them have shown any interest in the art, he said.

Lee said he'll donate or sell the trees when he can no longer care for them.

In recent years, Lee has pared his bonsai collection down to about 80 trees, ranging from tropical varieties that remain indoors during the winter, to hardier versions, such as Japanese Maples, that go dormant during the winter months and remain in the garage.

There are three key ingredients to a healthy bonsai: good light, the right moisture and proper fertilizer.

The importance of light is obvious, but moisture and fertilizer are often misunderstood ingredients, Lee said.

Since the trees spend their lives in containers, they rely on the owner to carefully balance their food and water needs. Too much water and the roots will rot. Not enough, and they'll dry out.

Both are fatal, and as Lee said, "dead trees

do not make good bonsai."

He has his own technique for maintaining proper moisture — none of his trees are planted in soil. Instead, they're rooted in a base of rocks, pebbles and bark chips. The rocks and bark hold just enough moisture for about one day of watering.

That means Lee must water them every day — a task he enjoys now that he's retired.

You'll find him outside at 6 a.m. every morning, walking amongst the trees perched on his back porch. "I still cherish every morning when I get to water these guys," he said with a smile. He even built special shelves on the porch to hold them all.

He doesn't use regular tap water, either. Instead, he stores up to 1,000 litres of rainwater in barrels for watering. The slight acidity of Waterloo Region rain actu-

ally aids with mineral absorption, he noted. If Lee uses tap water, he lets it sit for 12 hours first to allow the chlorine to evaporate.

The next critical factor for bonsai health is fertilizer. It can take up to 10 years to understand what a tree needs just by looking at it, but once you've mastered it, the trees "talk" to you, Lee said.

"There's a great amount of reading involved in the nutrients and minerals the tree needs — chlorine, manganese, sulphur, and some heavy metals," he said. Limp or lifeless leaves are signs to look for.

There is also no ideal bonsai species, but Lee said the typical ficus works well. The trees remain so small due to the limited space in the containers, as well as by trimming the leaves and branches.

Lee said caring for a bonsai tree is a commitment, and one that many who are new to the artform don't realize when they get their first tree.

When he first got involved with bonsai trees, Lee joined the KW Bonsai Society, which hosts meetings on the third Wednesday of every month at the Adult Recreation Centre in Waterloo, 185 King St. S.

Lee also teaches an introductory class on bonsai trees at the Lee Valley store in Waterloo. The next class scheduled is for May.

The bonsai society's president, Nigel Saunders, said it was founded in 1973 and has about 16 active members. Membership is \$20 for the year, and members enjoy workshops and discussions on certain bonsai techniques and trends during their meetings.

Saunders said bonsai trees teach discipline and fuel his love for artistic expression.

"I like the fact they're never the same," said Saunders, who has more than 150 trees himself. "You're always looking for perfection, but it's unattainable. It's like you're chasing a dream."

Bonsai trees have enriched Lee's life more than he ever could have imagined while growing up a poor boy in China.

"Stress, more than anything else, destroys the body," he said. He paused for a moment, looking at the bonsai tree on his kitchen table, then said, "I think I'm going to live longer than I expected."

For more information about bonsai trees, you can email Saunders directly at saunders.nigel40@gmail.com, or visit the KW Bonsai Society Facebook page, www.facebook.com/kwbonsaisociety.



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