

*Tuning  
into* **Nature**

by Katherine Wimble Fox



When Hurricane Florence crashed into North Carolina in September 2018, the dam holding the lake next to artist Ron Lang's house broke. The lake drained, revealing numerous, small Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) *yamadori* (wild, bonsai-adaptable trees referred to as bonsai material by their collectors). When it was safe to venture out, Lang, who makes bonsai containers, sprang into action. He collected a few trees, placing the specimens in plastic tubs where they will stay for a year or more while the roots grow and he ponders the look of the containers he will make for them.

### An Awareness of Nature

Bald Cypress—common in Lang's neck of the woods—is a species of tree with which he is very familiar. As an artist who makes bonsai containers, “You spend a lot of time looking at trees,” Lang explains. The practice of making containers that are meant to show off living trees in the best possible way requires deep observation. He adds, “You become very attuned to the habits of trees—their growing conditions, the weather around them, the winds, their growing altitude, their proximity to water—those kinds of things.” Tuning into trees leads to tuning into nature in general, and in turn, paying closer attention to the relationship between humans and the natural world.

One could argue that it has never been more critical that we develop an awareness of nature than it is now, as we find ourselves in the Anthropocene, the age of the sixth mass extinction, facing the possibility of the destruction of nature as we know it. If we care about nature and our own survival on this blue-green planet, we had better start paying close attention to the natural cycles of living systems, wherever we can access them, and aligning our lives in harmony with them, fast.

### An Appreciation for Bonsai

Bonsai presents a rich space in which to both access natural systems and examine our imbricated human-nature relationship. Bonsai is an ancient exploration in cultivation originating in China around the 6th century before being carried to Japan with the spread of Buddhism, where it was refined. In *bonsai* (Japanese for potted tree), the ceramic vessel (*bon*) fulfills a metaphorical function: it represents the human component in the relationship. The container creates a sculptural environment. It is the site of bonsai, as a site in the landscape is to architecture. It sets up a tectonic understanding of nature as sculpture, nature as art, nature as collaborator; and us as nurturers, as respectful co-creators, as reverential admirers. As such, bonsai provides an accessible, compelling example of how we can co-create with nature and live in a more reverential relationship with it.

Appreciating bonsai seems to come easily for most people; practicing bonsai as an artist gets more complicated. “The learning curve for a bonsai-container artist is steep,” Lang explains. In addition to learning how to execute containers that provide for basic tree needs (i.e. air, water, protection, and care, and thus drainage holes, feet that allow for proper air circulation, tie-in holes, and



**Opposite:** Bald Cypress bonsai in Vaughn Banting's ceramic container at the Pacific Bonsai Museum. *Photo: Chris Hornbecker for Pacific Bonsai Museum.*  
**1** Collected Bald Cypress waiting to be potted. *Photo: Ron Lang.* **2** Sharon Edwards-Russell's bonsai container; Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) styled by Ryan Neil; Austin Heitzman's walnut stand. *Photo: Bonsai Mirai.*



**3** The handbuilding process of a 32-inch slab-built bonsai container. *Photo: Ron Lang.* **4** Ron Lang showing the base of his Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired container for the LAB Session 1. *Photo: Timothy Aguero for the Pacific Bonsai Museum.* **5, 6** Ron Lang's Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired container made for the LAB Session 1. **5, 6** *Photos: Bonsai Mirai.*

adequate space at the rim to remove the tree entirely from time-to-time for root pruning (see *Ceramics Monthly* November 2014, p. 24–27)), one needs to develop an eye for the proportional relationship between pot and tree, and what kinds of colors and textures work with living trees. “These are things best learned from keeping a collection of bonsai over time,” Lang contends and does so himself so that he can keep referring back to what trees need, what shows them off best, and how he can attune himself better to their nature.

Lang’s interest in bonsai was piqued by what he describes as a “magical encounter” with a bonsai collection at around age ten at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. The image of those miniature, ancient-looking trees in shallow containers lurked in the back of his mind for years, surfacing during graduate school when he made his first bonsai containers. Lang went on to teach ceramics for 3 years in Wisconsin and then for 30 years at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore where he served as department chair during that time. In 2003, he and his life and business partner Sharon Edwards-Russell, who also has an MFA in ceramics and 20 years of college-level teaching experience, moved to rural central Pennsylvania where they established Lang Bonsai Containers. In 2016, they relocated to their current home and studio in North Carolina.

### Finding a Comfortable Process

Over the years, Lang has fine-tuned his working process to arrive at precisely dimensioned finished pieces for custom orders that account for shrinkage during drying and firing. His process usually starts with sketching, on paper and in clay, which develops into dimensioned architectural plans and elevation drawings to represent his design. He has also fine-tuned his collaborative process, preferring to develop custom containers for specific trees in consultation with individual bonsai artists, as opposed to creating pots on speculation. When he can work collaboratively, as he does more and more, he will go back and forth with a fellow bonsai artist, reviewing photos of the tree and discussing what they each see in it. In the end, ideally, the container fits the tree and the tree’s growing environment is customized. The environment is an architectural form, striving for cooperation with rather than mimicry of nature in deference to the tree, and the marriage between bon and sai is harmonious, balanced, and complementary: the gestalt.

### Experimenting with Bonsai

So as to not let Lang get too comfortable with his process, the Pacific Bonsai Museum in Federal Way, Washington, threw him a new challenge in 2018 when they invited him, along with bonsai artist Ryan Neil and stand maker Austin Heitzman, to take part in a new experimental project called the LAB (Living Art of Bonsai). The museum founded the LAB project as a kind of artists’ residency that would invite three artists to work together in a way that would mix up the typical sequence in which bonsai is made. Traditionally, as established in Japan, bonsai displays are created by first styling a tree, then placing it into a container on a stand, and finally presenting all three in a *tokonoma* (a special



7 Ron Lang presents two bonsai container options for Ryan Neil's Limber Pine at the LAB Session 2. 8 Ryan Neil's Limber Pine (Pinus flexilis) in Ron Lang's container at LAB Session 3. 7, 8 Photos: Timothy Aguero for the Pacific Bonsai Museum.



architectural space in the home for the display of revered objects). The LAB asks: what if the stand came first? Or, the pot? Or, the architectural environment? Where can these makers take the art of bonsai if they allow themselves to be influenced by each other, and architectural spaces, in an entirely new way?

The LAB project will unfold over two years as multiple, concurrent experiments are tested through which each artist will get a chance to take the lead. They will each work in private in their studios and then come together at a series of public events, revealing their works before a live audience, including their collaborators. With secrecy and suspense built into the project, Lang's process has had to shift to accommodate a new way of collaborating. He reckons, "This is more like improvisational jazz. I take a turn, then boom, you take a turn."

To complicate the experiment even further, the artists were asked to respond to an inspirational architectural environment as a starting point. For the first session of the LAB, that environment was a Frank Lloyd Wright–designed home in Lakewood, Washington. When Lang learned about the Wright connection, he was all in. Frank Lloyd Wright referred to his designs as organic, which could seem confusing to some people who would then expect to find curvy amoeba-shaped buildings. To Wright, organic meant wholeness: a sense of interconnected, overlapping parts. He executed his organic architecture in overlapping geometric forms focusing on cohesion.

Lang's Frank Lloyd Wright–inspired container evolved over three tries before he arrived at the final design. "When I got to the first LAB session, I second-guessed my container, wondering, had I been too referential?" He carried on with his second guessing over the air during a candid *Bonsai Mirai: Asymmetry* podcast recorded the day after the first LAB session. "Now, looking back, with less sleep deprivation, I think I might have been too hard on myself. I don't think I was too referential, I stand by my piece and it's definitely going to be an interesting challenge for Austin

and Ryan to respond to," which is the point of the project: to get artists out of their comfort zones in order to stimulate innovation.

With all things bonsai, natural cycles must be honored lest the trees suffer; therefore, with session 2 of the LAB occurring in April, the focus shifted to spring potting season. In spring, bonsai artists attune themselves to the signs that their trees are waking up from winter dormancy and getting ready to transport stored sugar from their roots to limb tips. This time presents a window when bonsai root pruning and repotting can occur: if this work is carried out too early, the roots won't have added energy to heal their pruning cuts; too late, and they will have already become accustomed to drinking from the roots the artist intends to prune. So, for session 2, repotting became the name of the game and the pot took the lead. Lang revealed two new pots: one for Heitzman's session 1 stand and another that Neil used as the site for his Frank Lloyd Wright–inspired bonsai from session 1. This time the artists gathered in Gig Harbor, Washington, at a home designed by pioneering Modernist architect Mary Lund Davis, who herself was inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright and bonsai. With its own kind of geometric organicity, the architecture of the home forms patterns in 120° angles, triangles, and circles that radiate out from a central hearth and echo into the surrounding landscape. How this home influenced Lang and the other LAB artists' work will be played out over the coming months. "We are certainly working on redefining bonsai. Or maybe we will end up needing another word?" Lang wonders. As blurry as the line gets trying to define organicity, and as hard as it is to answer questions like, "what is art?" or "what is nature?" we may indeed need a new word to describe our complicated collaborations.

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