

# The art of bonsai on view at Stamford Museum

By Scott Gargan

For 15 years they stood, blending in among the plants and shrubs in Norm Geisinger's lush, front yard garden.

They were bonsai once. That was until Geisinger, who was working as a financial director when he took up the ancient Japanese art form, got too busy to maintain the pair of junipers.

"I planted them at my house and that's where they stayed," he said.

But the trees were meant for more than the garden-variety life of landscape greenery; it was time, Geisinger decided one day, to whip them back into shape. All it would take was some skill, patience and just the right pots.

"The ultimate beauty of these trees is when they become true bonsai as opposed to something that's in training," Geisinger, of New Fairfield, said. "They can begin as trees in a garden, and they become bonsai."

Geisinger and his fellow bonsai buffs will have the chance to show off their blooms when the Stamford Museum and Nature Center hosts "The Art of Bonsai" from Friday, April 26, through Sunday, April 28.

Presented by the Yama Ki Bonsai Society, of which Geisinger is a member and past president, the exhibition showcases 75 unique bonsai trees by approximately 20 artists. The festivities will include a Japanese Tea Ceremony on Saturday, April 27, at 1 p.m., with a demonstration and lecture on the history of tea.



Norm Geisinger, of New Fairfield, prunes his bonsai tree. The artist's work is on view in "The Art of Bonsai" at the Stamford Museum & Nature Center from Friday, April 26, through Sunday, April 28.

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Originating in China and India more than 1,000 years ago, bonsai — derived from the Japanese word for pot and the verb "to plant" — is the practice of dwarfing and shaping trees in shallow pots for aesthetic purposes. Artists design the plants by trimming, training, pruning and grafting branches and roots.

Bonsai come in all shapes and sizes, depending on the type of tree and the vision of the artist. Trees can range

from the basic formal upright (or chokkan) style — in which branches progress regularly from the thickest and broadest at the bottom to the finest and shortest at the top — to more complex forms.

Like many bonsai artists, Geisinger aims to instill "the look of an ancient tree" in his work. To that end, he grows big heavy roots or shaves off the bark of certain areas of the tree to mimic the visage of a large, old tree. Some-

## If you go

Stamford Museum & Nature Center, 39 Scofieldtown Road. Friday, April 26, 1-4 p.m.; Saturday, April 27, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sunday, April 28, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. \$10, \$8 for seniors, \$6 for students, \$5 for ages 4-17 and free for children 3 and younger. 203-322-1646 or [www.stamfordmuseum.org](http://www.stamfordmuseum.org).

times, he'll create a "wind-swept" look (or fukinagashi style), in which the tree appears to be affected by strong winds blowing continuously from one direction.

As Geisinger explained,

bonsai isn't just rooted in the creative vision of the artist — it's a collaboration.

"When you sit and look at a new raw tree, you have to ask, 'What is the tree telling you? What is its story?'" he said.

Many of those stories began centuries ago. Pound Ridge, N.Y., resident Michael Pollack, another artist featured in the exhibition, enjoys working with very old trees. For example, a juniper tree he retrieved from the Rocky Mountains is literally hundreds of years old.

"Just like a fine antique, the bonsai have qualities that come with age — they have a presence," said Pollack, who is also the owner of Bonsai Shinsei New York, which offers bonsai classes. "It's palpable and powerful."

If properly cared for, "bonsai can live forever," Pollack added. And in that sense, bonsai is like no other art form — it is a living, growing piece of art that will evolve and change continuously through time. There is no such thing as a complete bonsai (for example, a red pine bonsai at the Akao Herb and Rose Garden in Atami, Japan is said to be 600 years old).

And as Geisinger's experience with the two junipers shows, bonsai can be given a second life. All it takes is the love and attention of a dedicated bonsai artist.

"I enjoy the aspect of... deciding what direction you want to go with bonsai," Geisinger said. "There's a feeling of quiet, a satisfaction you get from a tree telling you what it wants to do and what you want it to do."

Formed in 1973, the Yama Ki Bonsai Society is a forum for discussion and education on bonsai for people living in Fairfield County and Westchester County, N.Y. The group's name, Yama Ki, means "Mountain Tree."

Visit [www.yamakibonsai.org](http://www.yamakibonsai.org).

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