

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Unraveling the Mystery in Tiny Trees

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It was 40 years ago when Bonsai West's founder Michael Levin's curiosity was piqued by sighting what seemed an impossible little tree. It was a bonsai, and his passion, which "hit him like a lightning bolt," sent him on a cross-country bonsai treasure hunt. The tale of Bonsai West is one of growth, discovery and a journey where Michael sought not only the plants themselves, but the bonsai masters to learn about the history and craftsmanship of bonsais.

His bonsai quest led Michael to California, where there was a small, but thriving, community of bonsai artisans.

"They were taken in by my passion and interest, and introduced me to their friends, including Japanese artisans," said Michael.

Pictured: Michael Levin, owner of Bonsai West in Littleton, Massachusetts, began his bonsai journey 40 years ago.

He immersed himself in the world of bonsais, bringing back his knowledge, passion and the trees to the East Coast.

"In the old days, it was about teaching people how to keep them alive," said Michael. "Now our customers want to know so much more."

Over the years, Bonsai West has had many iterations—from its early beginning of an ad-hoc sidewalk shop to an expansive wholesale operation with clients ranging from Montreal, Quebec, to Washington, D.C. However, Michael realized that he no longer had the time to fully explore his craftsmanship, so he decided to scale back his operation to focus on what he was genuinely passionate about: cultivating bonsais, and sharing his passion and knowledge with others.

When asked about his mentors, Michael shared that they were primarily nursery growers, not bonsai artisans, although he did maintain connections with the Japanese community.

"When I visited growers across the country to buy nursery stock, I noticed that they were really geniuses in the world of horticulture," said Michael.

He said that he relates more to being a grower than an artist and prides himself on having some of the healthiest

trees in the industry. He describes himself as a nurseryman and farmer—the only difference is that his trees are shaped to remain small.

“Plants want to grow and be healthy,” shared Michael. “You can’t have the art without the craft, and the craft isn’t just about knowing how to manipulate the branches.”

Bonsai West is located on a 1-acre property in the suburbs of Littleton, Massachusetts, where Michael has nurtured a thriving bonsai business. The nursery is designed in the style of an arboretum, where customers are immersed in a range of bonsai specimens that rival what one may experience in Japan.

“We are not really propagators,” he said. “For the most part, we hunt for older trees, prune, shape them and sell them as finished bonsais.”

The company also purchases a selection of nursery stock, including dwarf maples, Japanese maples, pines, junipers and flowering trees like azalea, and prunes them back to begin the bonsai process. It’s a lengthy transformation, often taking several years before the tree is ready to be sold.

“Growing bonsais is a serious commitment, but I knew from the very beginning that I wanted to be more than a merchant,” Michael said.

The site includes Michael’s personal collection of plants, including a few of his original plants procured from the Japanese artists in the early ’80s.

“Every tree in our space has a story, from the stock plant to the finished potted trees,” said Michael. “People buying bonsai are looking for a wide variety of experiences, but we do have to almost break people out of this mold of growing houseplants.”

He prides himself on being a full-service bonsai nursery, with 50% of his business focused on service, including education, babysitting, pruning and repotting.

“Living in New England, many of the trees can’t live outside for the winter, but they can’t live inside either, as they need to go dormant,” said Michael.

The trees are placed in a refrigerated facility that has the perfect dormant temperatures. The babysitting portion of his business continues to grow, as his clients recognize the care needs of these trees and reach out to Bonsai West for their expertise and care.

“It wasn’t long for me to realize that if I could take care of our customers’ trees and bring it back to them in a better condition, then we have secured both their trust and the likelihood that they will increase their bonsai collection,” said Michael.

He proudly shared that his company has dramatically increased the growth of bonsai in the whole region.

“Everyone thinks that bonsais are hard to grow, but through our teachings and services—including our plant sitting—we have managed to grow a hobby throughout New England,” he said.

Education continues to play a significant component of Bonsai West’s business, including providing a library of videos online and a range of classes from an introduction to bonsai to a bonsai “date night,” called “Yours, Mine and Ours,” where a couple can create three bonsais in one class.

“Everybody in our Bonsai West community really wants to learn more about cultivating these trees; our classes fill up as quickly as we put them online,” stated Michael.

Over the years, Bonsai West has had hundreds of students take their classes, with most registering for several, as

they grow their own hobby alongside others from Bonsai West's community.

"There are not a lot of things in the world that are as real as a bonsai," said Michael. "When you enter a bonsai nursery, you are immediately struck by dedicated staff, talented teachers and passionate customers, all working together so that these beautiful trees flourish." **GT**

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