



## ROYAL TREATMENT

### A REVERED NATIONAL BONSAI COLLECTION HAS A NEW HOME.

BY JANE BERGER

**B**onsai is a centuries-old art form in Asia, but it was little known in the United States until after 1945, when American servicemen encountered it during the military occupation of Japan. Many returning soldiers joined bonsai clubs that had sprung up in some parts of the United States, notably in New York, California, Washington, D.C., and Hawaii. Around the same time, the horticulturist John Creech visited bonsai nurseries and became acquainted with several bonsai masters while on plant-hunting expeditions in Japan in the 1950s and 1960s. On a 1974 visit to China, Creech met practitioners of penjing, an older form of miniature, living

trees and shrubs that he described as “strong and severe in character as opposed to the more graceful and reflective style of the Japanese.”

Creech became the director of the U.S. National Arboretum in 1973, and arranged for a gift of bonsai from the Japanese people in honor of the U.S. bicentennial. He proposed the establishment of a bonsai museum on the arboretum’s grounds. Masao Kinoshita of Sasaki Associates in Watertown, Massachusetts—an expert in Japanese design—was hired for the project, which is now the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C.

The museum is said to have been the first in the world dedicated to the display of bonsai when it opened in 1976 with a gift of 53 bonsai from the Nippon Bonsai Association. The collection included a number of priceless plants: the Yamaki Pine, a Japanese white pine (*Pinus parviflora* ‘Miyajima’) dating to 1625, which survived the atomic blast at Hiroshima; a Japanese red pine (*Pinus densiflora*) in training since 1795 that was a gift from Emperor Hirohito; an 1895 trident maple (*Acer buergerianum*) that was a gift from Prince Takamatsu, the emperor’s brother; and a 1926 Japanese hemlock (*Tsuga diversifolia*) from Princess Chichibu, the emperor’s

**ABOVE**  
The 1795 Japanese red pine in the pavilion’s informal *so* section was a gift from Emperor Hirohito.

ALLEN RUSS PHOTOGRAPHER

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sister-in-law. The gifts from the Imperial Household marked the first time that any bonsai from its collection had left the country. In later years, additional prized specimens were added to the collection, which now numbers 63 plants. In 1982, the National Bonsai Foundation (NBF) was established to promote the museum's collections and raise funds for its expansion.

The original museum complex included an entrance garden through a forest of Japanese cedars (*Cryptomeria japonica*) with underplantings



**TOP**

Bonsai are displayed on natural stone plinths in the foreground and semiformal stones to the rear.

**RIGHT**

Eye-level bonsai specimens rest on engineered wood platforms atop natural stones.



of Japanese woodland plants. There was a large, open, sloping courtyard paved with gravel, and a Japanese stroll garden with a winding path that led to a walled Japanese pavilion with an open roof. The pavilion was constructed of cinder block walls covered by stucco, with wood rafters above, gravel underfoot, and long wooden tables where the bonsai were displayed.

After several years, the sloping courtyard became a huge problem: Every time it rained, the curator's office flooded. The arboretum and the NBF brought in Rhodeside & Harwell of Alexandria, Virginia, to fix the problem and redesign the main entry garden, the courtyard, and the Japanese stroll garden to comply with the Americans for Disabilities Act (ADA). New walls, a gate, and bluestone paving were added to the original entrance garden.

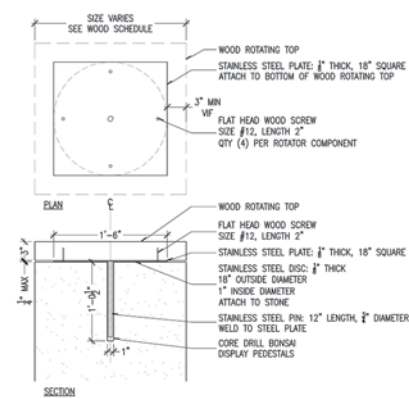
Faye Harwell, FASLA, a principal of Rhodeside & Harwell, says, "The idea was that the detailing would be Asian in inspiration but not tied to any one specific Asian culture...you had that feeling of Asian design, but it didn't say 'this is Chinese,' or 'this is Korean,' or 'this is Japanese.' And then when you enter the pavilions, they are much more specifically of their cultural origin."

As the Japanese pavilion approached its 40th anniversary, the foundation saw the open-air building needed an update. The walls were cracking, and the wooden display benches and overhead rafters were deteriorating. The arboretum and the foundation again hired Rhodeside & Harwell for the project. Felix Laughlin, the foundation's president, wanted "a world-class display" to present bonsai as an art form and show it was "not just a horticultural pursuit."

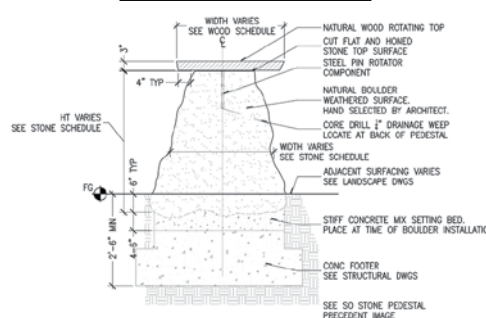




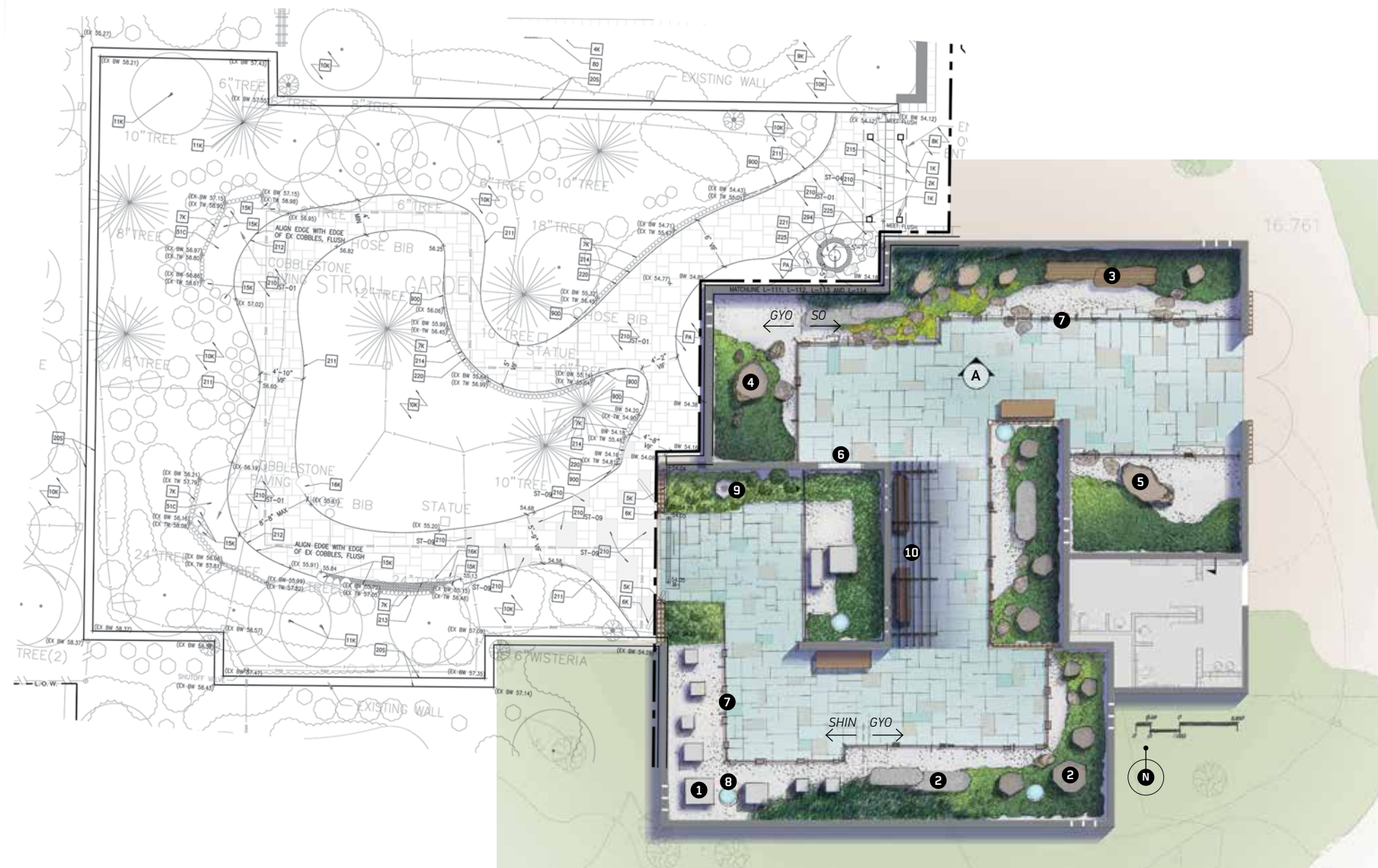
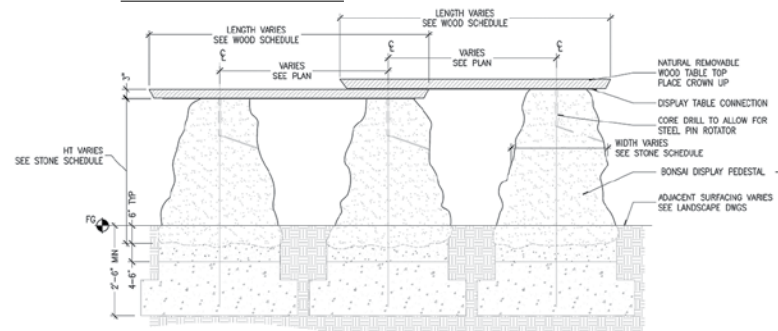
**STEEL PIN ROTATOR**



**SINGLE PEDESTAL DISPLAY**



**DOUBLE TABLE DISPLAY**



**PLAN**

- 1 BONSAI DISPLAY (SHIN)
- 2 BONSAI DISPLAY (GYO)
- 3 BONSAI DISPLAY (SO)
- 4 IWASAKI PINE (GYO)
- 5 IMPERIAL PINE (SO)
- 6 MOON WINDOW
- 7 RAILING WITH IDENTIFICATION SIGNS
- 8 WATER STORAGE BASIN
- 9 NEW JAPANESE LANTERN
- 10 WOOD TRELLIS SHADE SCREEN OVER BENCHES

**BELOW**  
The bonsai display elevation shows the transitional elements between the semiformal *gyo* and natural *so* areas.

**ABOVE**  
The installation crew lifts large stone display plinths into place.

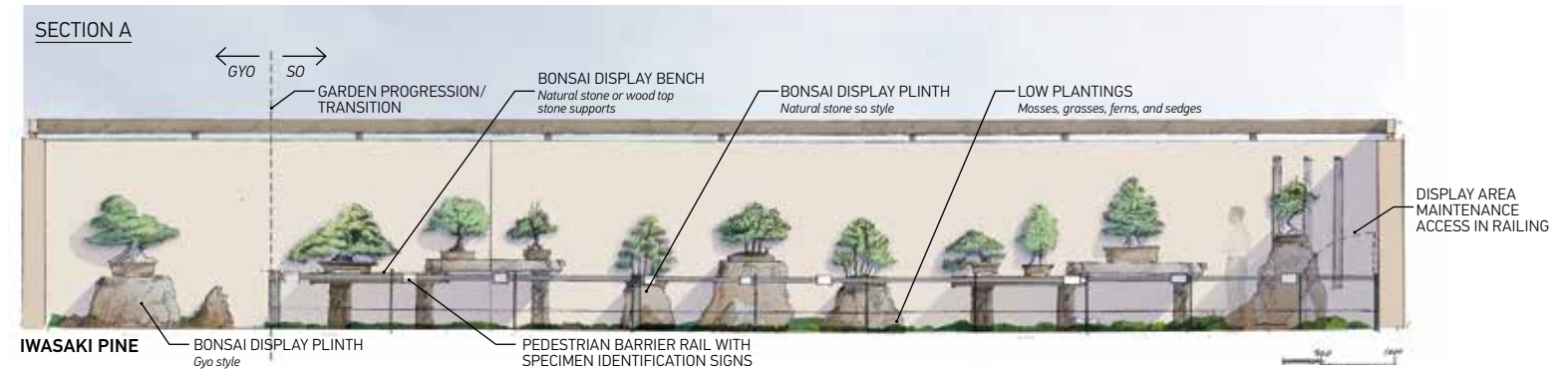
Laughlin brought in the renowned Japanese garden designer Hoichi Kurisu, Affiliate ASLA, to work on the renovation. "I knew that Hoichi had the right sensibility," Laughlin says. "He always talked about how Japanese gardens had therapeutic value and power, and that it really was a way to raise one's consciousness."

Kurisu decided that the bonsai collection should be displayed on stone plinths in accordance with a Japanese classification of formality in

art—the *shin*, or formal; the *gyo*, or semiformal; and the *so*, or informal. "If we display the bonsai accordingly," he said, "people will understand the art of bonsai itself." The pavilion was divided into three sections that correspond to this transitional idea. Kurisu explained that the scheme is akin to the practice of bonsai, when collectors range high into the mountains to search for diminutive, weathered, aging specimens that are brought home, coddled, shaped, and pruned to express the beauty of na-

ture. "Bonsai is wonderful therapy," he says, "in a busy and uncertain world," where their timeless qualities release emotions that connect the visitor "to the essence of nature, even in Washington, D.C."

The collection itself drove much of the design. Bonsai require painstaking care. They need daily watering and temperatures that are not too hot, and sun or shade depending on the species. Richard Olsen, the director of the arboretum, says arboretum staff







**TOP LEFT**

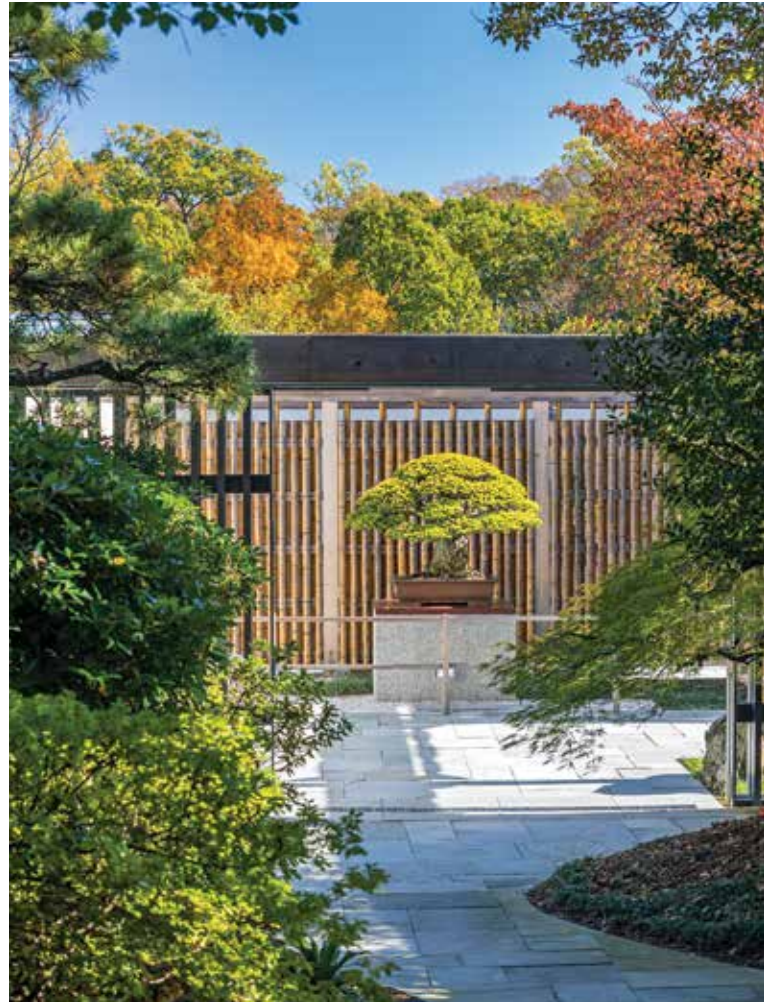
The winding path in the Japanese stroll garden leads to the Japanese pavilion.

**TOP RIGHT**

The Yamaki Pine, dating to 1625, survived the blast at Hiroshima and is the oldest bonsai in the collection.

members were “constantly scrutinizing” details as plans were developed. They explained to the design team that a 250-pound bonsai needed a movable railing so it could be relocated to other quarters in winter, and that easy access to planting beds was required for bonsai maintenance. Scott Aker, the arboretum’s director of horticulture and education, says bonsai placement was also a major consideration, because there’s an “optimal height at which each piece should be displayed from the ground.” So the stone display pedestals carved by Kurisu had to be of different sizes.

The landscape architects worked with the architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle on parts of the new structure. The architects handled design of the walls and overhead structure, while Rhodeside & Harwell replaced some of the stucco walls with bamboo and installed wall openings, including a moon window, to promote air circulation. Overhead, retractable fabric shade screens provide more or less sun



to the plants as needed. The plain stucco and bamboo walls were essential for the overall display, Laughlin says. “If the background is not just a simple wall, you can’t see the bonsai.”

Kurt Parker, ASLA, a principal landscape architect at Rhodeside & Harwell, traveled with Kurisu to North Carolina to select stones for the *gyo* and *so* sections of the project. “Most of the stones we selected were natural, weathered pieces with lichen and moss,” he says. Kurisu carved the gneiss stones to make the bonsai

pedestals, exposing natural marbling on some that “became part of the interpretation.” The square stones in the formal, or *shin*, part of the garden are made from a salt-and-pepper granite that came from China. Harwell says the progression in stones from formal to semiformal to natural represents “three levels of unraveling, or revealing of nature... as you walk through the garden... you can see that the initial stones are very formal—they’ve been cut and finished—and the trace of human hands starts to disappear the more you get into the depth of the



**ABOVE**  
The moon window promotes air circulation and is installed between the formal and semiformal sections of the pavilion.

garden. So you can see that transition from the very formal worked pieces of stone to the ones that are partly worked and partly natural and then the ones that are natural.”

A major concern about the stone plinths, however, was the heat they might collect during the day and radiate back up onto the bonsai. Harwell and arboretum staff visited a bon-

sai collector in Pennsylvania whose specimens were on wood tables, and they soon decided to do the same thing. The designers hired a wood consultant to determine how to engineer platforms to go on top of the display stones. Using an African mahogany called sapele, the wood was cut into planks to prevent warping, laminated together, and coated to keep the moisture content inside.

**“THE TRACE OF HUMAN HANDS STARTS TO DISAPPEAR THE MORE YOU GET INTO THE DEPTH OF THE GARDEN.”**

—FAYE HARWELL, FASLA

The overhead superstructure designed by the architect included stainless steel fitches—metal plates that connect and strengthen pieces of wood—so Parker designed fitches for the ground-level cedar fencing to echo the details above. Bluestone paving was installed to meet ADA requirements and to make the space accessible for arboretum events.

To mitigate Washington’s summertime heat and to make the pavilion more “gardenesque,” Aker suggested planting ground covers under the bonsai, along with an irrigation system to cool the entire area. He also believes that mist from the system will promote the spontaneous appearance of moss and lichen.

Olsen told me the ground cover plants in the Japanese pavilion were selected with much care because “the plants we use in our landscapes are basically our collections.... We always let our designers know that we have a pretty strict living collections policy that stresses enhancing the collection as much as possible with high provenance material,” he says. ●

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