Plants for Peace

Martin Klein Shares a Remarkable Collection with the Arnold Arboretum

Janetta Stringfellow, Director of Development

Marty Klein greets me warmly at the door, and with a quick turn directs my attention to the main event: his trees. I scamper after him into his greenhouse, filled with dwarfed plants too numerous to count. He is particularly pleased that a gardenia (Gardenia jasminoides) is in full bloom—an unexpected and fragrant treat on a cold December morning. Outside, ice covers the patio and grass, but the tree stands suggest this garden is a bonsai showplace. The benches, shelves, and gazebo—all staging areas for Marty’s collection—lie empty, but that doesn’t mean there is nothing to see. A long-time member of the Arboretum, he points out several Arboretum trees shared as member dividends: ‘Arnold Promise’ witch hazel (Hamamelis × intermedia ‘Arnold Promise’), seven son flower (Heptacodium miconioides), dwarf Alberta spruce (Picea glauca ‘Conica’), and katsura (Cercidiphyllum japonicum) to name a few.

Just when I think it’s time to go inside to talk, he leads me into a shed lined with shelf after shelf of bonsai pots of all sizes from the United States, England, and Japan. He explains he never has the exact shape and size he needs, so he always orders more. A staircase descends to a makeshift lab where he experiments on ways to keep the trees healthy during the winter, and suddenly dozens of additional specimens appear. Marty’s love for his trees, and the Arboretum, is palpable. Only after a full viewing of his collection do we go inside to his study to talk.

Marty grew up in Sunnyside, Queens in the 1940s. When he tells me about his childhood—playing stickball in the streets using cars as bases, and recovering lost balls from the sewers with coat-hangers—I feel like I’m watching a sepia-colored film. He lived with his parents and sister in a little apartment until he was 10, when they moved to the “country” in Westchester County, NY. Mount Vernon was conducive to his family’s love of gardening and trees—in fact, his mother had a bonsai collection of her own and took lessons from a pioneering Japanese teacher.

A natural engineer, Marty attended MIT, and has been in Boston ever since. He has enjoyed an accomplished career, inventing the sonar equipment used to find the Titanic and other famous shipwrecks—technology he used “with some success” in seeking the Loch Ness monster. Marty can’t remember not coming to the Arboretum and has always cherished the landscape as a tranquil oasis. Plants became a bigger part of his life when [Continued on page 11]
phenological diversity. Two different varieties planted side by side could reach maturity over five to six weeks apart, so you could harvest one plant in September and wait until mid-October to harvest the other. This represents an incredible level of diversity, and raises the question of how plants that are genetically so similar can respond so differently to climate.

The second reason this study captured my attention is the quantity and quality of the existing data. Winegrape harvest records are among the oldest continuous written archives on Earth. In Burgundy, records date back to the 1300s, offering astonishing historical context for climate change. For example, we see that recent harvests are the earliest on record, earlier than any harvest over the last 700 years!

Q: Your study notes wine producers’ increasing reliance on a handful of varieties in the global market. What makes this so concerning, and is diversification the solution?

A: While a lack of variety-level diversity in the wine industry may have not been a major issue 30 or 40 years ago, climate change presents such an enormous challenge to agriculture and is forcing growers to be more flexible and adaptable. Winegrape growers make huge investments in money and time to select, cultivate, and preserve plants that perform well under very specific conditions. So utilizing more wine grape varieties may offer needed adaptability, but only to a point because the needle will keep moving. So as the next step in our work we will test how much benefit growers could see from changing varieties as climate continues to shift. Continued warming will make it difficult to keep growing grapes in some regions, so perhaps the biggest uncertainty for growers is knowing which warming scenario will come to pass. The fact is, humans have tremendous control over the answer to that question, and it is absolutely critical to what the future of wine will look like.

he received—and soon killed—a Japanese garden juniper (Juniperus procumbens ‘Nana’) bonsai as a thirtieth birthday gift. Like many other untrained bonsai enthusiasts, Marty didn’t realize that bonsai require what trees need in nature: being outside with natural temperature cycles, periods of darkness, and real wind and rain. Despite that initial failure, he was hooked and started learning.

Throwing himself fully into the bonsai world for the last four decades, Marty has worked with legendary bonsai artists like John Naka and travelled in the US and Asia to continue his training. He joined the American Bonsai Society, was recruited for their Board of Directors, and served as both Vice President and President—yet still calls himself an experienced beginner. “I’ve known the masters,” he explains, “and my best tree is nothing like their worst tree.” Though humble to the fact, Marty has amassed a spectacular collection, and honored the Arboretum in 2015 by donating ten fine specimens to our Bonsai & Penjing Collection. Marty dreams that the Arnold Arboretum will become a gathering place for bonsai enthusiasts and novices to get advice and to learn about display, pots, and plant health.

It all goes back to that feeling of tranquility Marty sought when he started walking in the Arboretum in 1958. “The world is in turmoil. If we talk about trees, we’re not talking about hurting each other. Bonsai are ambassadors for peace.”

The Arnold Arboretum’s collection of dwarfed, potted plants—now including ten individuals from the Martin Klein Collection—began with a donation of nearly 40 historical specimens acquired in Japan by Ambassador Larz Anderson. As stewards of a beloved and historically significant collection, the Arboretum is committed to providing superior care and facilities to ensure their long-term health and survival. A campaign is underway to raise $6M for a new bonsai enclosure, winter storage facility, and full-time keeper for the collection—all aimed to improve conditions and expand space and resources for cultivation, display, and teaching. Please donate online today or call Director of Development Janetta Stringfellow for more information, 617.384.5043.