

# Art in the Garden

American Bonsai:  
The Unbridled Art of Ryan Neil

Summer 2016



## American Bonsai: The Unbridled Art of Ryan Neil

Contemporary American bonsai artist Ryan Neil has devoted himself in recent years to developing a new American style of bonsai, distinct from the traditional Japanese form. This new style, currently experiencing a surge of growth across North America in part thanks to Neil's bold vision, celebrates American ideals of freedom, exploration, and discovery. It is informed by traditional bonsai practice, yet fundamentally different in that it eschews the pursuit of an idealized tree form. Instead, it seeks to express the unique features of the individual tree through training techniques that selectively emphasize these features while carefully applying key design principles of proportion and asymmetry.

Neil's romance with the world around him began at an early age, leading him to the formal study

of horticulture. Fascinated with the artistry and intentionality in bonsai, he went on to secure a coveted (and hard-earned) apprenticeship with Masahiko Kimura, the preeminent figure in contemporary Japanese bonsai. Upon completing his apprenticeship in 2010, Neil returned from Japan to create his visionary American bonsai incubator, Bonsai Mirai, just outside Portland, Oregon. Mirai boasts one of the largest and best-curated private bonsai gardens in the United States, and hosts regular groups of students who learn the craft under Neil's direct tutelage.

In addition to differences in shape and form, American bonsai is also distinct from Japanese bonsai in the sourcing of the trees themselves. "Art is primarily an expression of culture," says Neil. "For American bonsai to express American culture, the



material must be American material." Thus, Neil's bonsai comprise species that span the landscape of the American west, including Juniper from Colorado's Rocky Mountains; Redwoods from the coastal groves of California; Vine Maples from the Pacific Northwest; and many others. This local sourcing, paired with Neil's unique training techniques that highlight each tree's natural growth pattern, capture the culture of western America in a new light.

In order to give each piece a sense of context and separation from the traditional backdrop of the Portland Japanese Garden, Neil chose to surround the trees with bold, architectural display structures.

These enclosures focus the viewer's eye on the tree as a semi-isolated piece of art, while incorporating enough transparency to maintain a sense of the surrounding environment. The resulting viewing experience is a representation of the current state of American bonsai: rooted in tradition, but creating bold and decisive separation so as to grow more and more into a distinct artistic expression. Neil himself has an enthusiastic outlook: "We're experiencing a seminal moment in the practice of bonsai in America right now. It's exciting to see, and it will be even more exciting to see where it goes over the next several decades."

This exhibition will transport viewers from the Rocky Mountains of Colorado with its Ponderosa and Juniper to the Sierra Nevadas and coastal California's monumental trees. It's bonsai as a reflection of the American West. Using bigger scale, bolder design and native American species, we are reating a new direction for the world of traditional bonsai.

RYAN NEIL

**SPONSORED BY:**

The Autzen Foundation

**SPECIAL THANKS:**

Vasek and Travers Hill Polak and family, in honor of the Ellie Murrah Hill Bonsai Terrace opening in the new Cultural Village of the Portland Ja–panese Garden in 2017.

Ryan Neil is the guest curator for *American Bonsai: the Art of Ryan Neil*. His company Bonsai Mirai is an innovative American bonsai garden and school based in Portland, Oregon—a creative place that reflects the unbridled culture of its new home in the American West.

Diane Durston  
Curator of Culture, Art, and Education  
ddurston@japanesegarden.org



📷 All Photos: Jonathan Ley

Portland Japanese Garden | Post Office Box 3847 | Portland, Oregon 97208-3847

© 2018 Portland Japanese Garden. All rights reserved. Printed on 100% recycled fiber content with 100% post-consumer waste. Processed chlorine-free. FSC certified.