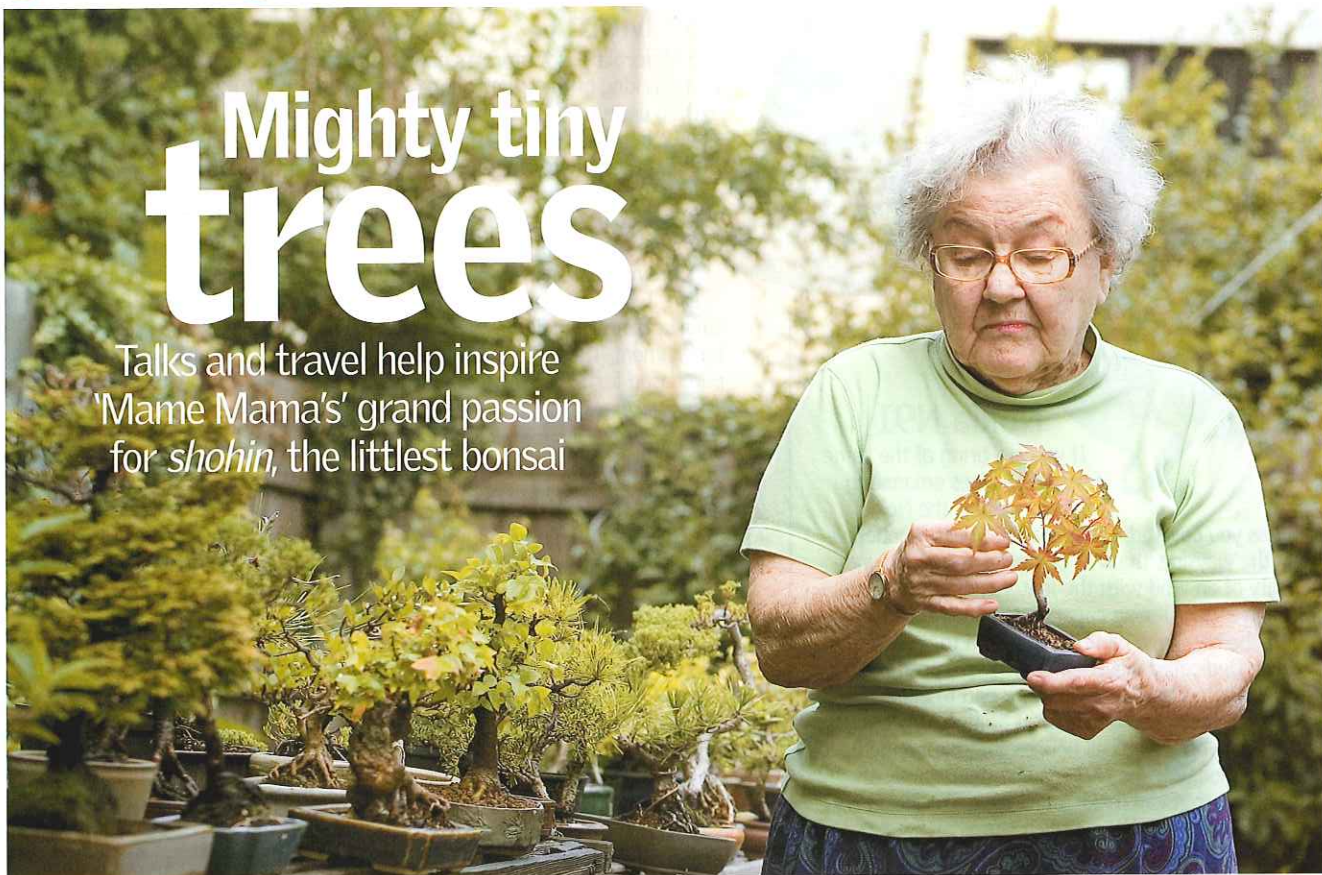


Mighty tiny trees

Talks and travel help inspire 'Mame Mama's' grand passion for *shohin*, the littlest bonsai



Dorie Froning of Wilmington tends to her bonsai collection, which includes carefully manicured specimens she's been training since 1967.

Story by **JOHN HARROD**
Photographs by **JENNIFER CORBETT**

Dorie Froning's interest in bonsai began nearly 40 years ago on her 13-acre home in Kennett Square, Pa. She'd often take her dog for walks and began to notice that one of the many white pines dotting the property wasn't growing as well as the rest.

"It was just this big," she recalls, motioning with her hands, "and all the rest were 15 feet tall."

So, she dug up the runt of a tree and decided to try to make it into a bonsai – a miniature version of itself. Bonsai (pronounced "bone-sigh") means "tray planting" in Japanese and is the art of growing dwarfed, ornamentally shaped trees or shrubs in small pots or trays.

That same year, her sister gave her a bonsai pot, and her son gave her a dwarf Alberta spruce. And her passion for the tree art form was born.

Froning, now 85, began learning all she could about the technique. She took courses at nearby Longwood Gardens. She bought every book she could find. She "killed a lot of trees trying to make a bonsai," she says, but she enjoyed every minute of her new hobby.

She didn't stop there. Once a year for 13 years, she'd travel north to New Hope, Pa., for a weeklong session with the late John

Naka of California, a world-renowned bonsai expert who has been credited with bringing the art form to the Western culture. Froning and 11 other bonsai enthusiasts from all over the region would create bonsai all day and "at 5 o'clock, we'd have our little toddlers." After dinner, they'd look at slides and critique the trees. "It was wonderful," she says.

With many styles to choose from, Froning favors the *shohin* form, for which she is well-known. *Shohin* means "small goods," and *shohin* bonsai are no taller than 10 inches. Froning began working with *shohin* out of necessity when she went on the first of four trips to Japan and started collecting small bonsai pots. "You have to have something to put in little pots," she says. She bought so many pots that her late husband liked to tease her that she "had a carry-on hanging on every finger."

Today, because of her love of the littlest bonsai, she is affectionately known as "Mame Mama" among her bonsai friends. Mame means "little bean" in Japanese.

In addition to traveling to Japan for inspiration, Froning has traveled to 75 cities in the United States and Canada, learning more about bonsai as well as giving lectures and demonstrations.

Though she has never formally counted

Find out more

The Brandywine Bonsai Society meets the third Saturday of the month, usually at the Brandywine Town Center at Concord Pike and Naamans Road. For more information, contact Steve Ittell, 778-4546, or visit www.gobbs.org.

If you're interested in getting started with bonsai, the society recommends the following retail locations for instruction and supplies:

- Nature's Way Nursery, 1451 Pleasant Hill Road, Linglestown, Pa. (717) 545-4555 or natureswaybonsai@comcast.net.
- Rosade Bonsai Studio, 6912 Ely Road, New Hope, Pa. (215) 862-5925 or www.rosadebonsai.com.
- Old Mill Bonsai Studio, 420 Lewis Mills Road, Honeybrook, Pa. (610) 942-2082.

If you want to see some bonsai, visit Longwood Gardens (www.longwoodgardens.org or [610] 388-1000), or make a day trip to the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. (www.usna.usda.gov/ or [202] 245-2726). The museum has an impressive collection of Japanese, Chinese and American bonsai.

her bonsai collection, she estimates that, at one point, she had hundreds. When she moved to a twin home in Wilmington's Trolley Square eight years ago, a smaller back yard required her to pare them down to fewer than 100.

She donated one – a trident maple growing over a rock – to Longwood Gardens, where it is still on display as part of the bonsai exhibit in the Conservatory. Froning volunteers once a week at Longwood, helping to maintain the collection.



European hornbeam

How to begin

Bonsai expert Dorie Froning recommends starting from scratch, not with a store-bought bonsai. "It's too expensive, and you can manage to kill bonsai. It's not hard," she says. Buy a plant in a one-gallon container and prune it back, or transform a plant from your yard. Something basic like a juniper is ideal for beginners. She also recommends reading about bonsai. A good reference is "Bonsai" by Sunset Books.

"Dorie is a tremendous help with the bonsai collection," says Mary Allinson, a section gardener at Longwood who oversees the bonsai collection. "She is talented, dependable and fun to be around."

Froning also still has a couple of shohin at the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. Froning was on the board of the National Arboretum for 11 years and had about 60 trees on display there at one time.

In addition to her service with the National Arboretum, Froning was president of the American Bonsai Society for three years. Perhaps her most prestigious recognition came when she won the society's Ben Oki Award, which honors individuals who share their time and talent with members of the bonsai community.

Froning also served as president of the Pennsylvania Bonsai Society and the Brandywine Bonsai Society, of which she is a founding member. Not coincidentally, the local

group has been around since 1967 – the same year Froning started creating bonsai.

The group started with five to seven people and has since grown to 65 to 70 members. It's open to anyone – from those who are just starting to those who know how to graft (in essence, surgically apply) branches onto existing bonsai. The society shows bonsai twice a year, at the Brandywine River Museum in June and Longwood Gardens in November.

Froning dabbles in related Japanese art forms such as suiseki, which involves natural rocks on display, but her heart and soul are in the little trees. She's currently training a Japanese red maple, and like all the others in her back yard, she'll likely be working on it for a long time to come.

That's because bonsai, unlike many other art forms, is never really finished.

"As long as the plant is growing, it's changing," she says. "You have to help it change or live with how it is."