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POTTER MANIA RESUMES

They're not witches either, but Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint and Emma Watson have been known to do a little sorcery in the movies, and we'll be streaming live video today at 1 p.m. as the stars arrive at the Odeon Theatre for the London premiere of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 1." Visit www.delawareonline.com.



This yew tree is emblematic of the slanting, or windswept, style of bonsai. Historically a Chinese art, bonsai was introduced to Japan around the 12th century through Zen Buddhism. The Japanese refined the art, paring it to its basic elements.

Small wonders

Bonsai gardeners show off their artistic manipulations of nature

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A stunning Japanese black pine grows in Steve Ittel's back yard.

Symmetrical branches reach outward from a burly trunk that zig-zags its way to the top. Lush, spiky needles contrast with the shaggy bark to form a perfect green dome of a crown. The tree's roots spread out into the surrounding soil where moss creeps between them.

For 10 years Ittel has tended this majestic plant – in a pot about the size of a baking dish. At 2 feet tall, it is a splendid bonsai specimen.



**backyard
gardener**

MOIRA
SHERIDAN

The pine, and two other of Ittel's trees, will be on display this weekend as part of the Brandywine Bonsai Society's exhibit at Longwood Gardens. Along with Ikebana International, the Society will exhibit their members' work Saturday and Sunday, from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. in the Exhibition Hall, where horticulture will meet Asian artistry.

From the Japanese words for pot (bon) and plant (sai), bonsai is an art form that recreates nature in miniature. Sometimes referred to as "tray gardening," it is an art that is often misunderstood.

Ittel, secretary of the Brandywine Bonsai Society, has been practicing bonsai for almost 20 years and maintains a diverse collection of trees in his Japanese-themed back yard in Centreville. The myths, he insists, still persist.

One of those myths is that bonsai is a certain type of tree.

"Bonsai can be done with many types of trees, and in the beginning, the trees are not special, but they become special with lots of attention," says Ittel. "Japanese black pines are classics." Good prospects for bonsai include pines, maples and azaleas.

His collection, displayed on specially constructed tables and shelves, includes both evergreen and deciduous trees, some planted in pots he made himself. Hinoki cypress, crabapple, elm, barberry, a "forest" of Japanese maples, and even Virginia creeper fill up the tables.

See **BONSAI** — B10

A crabapple from Steve Ittel's collection.



A cascading Shimpaku juniper



IF YOU GO

WHAT: Ikebana International & Brandywine Bonsai Society shows

WHEN: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

WHERE: Longwood Gardens, 1001 Longwood Road, Kennett Square, Pa.

TICKETS: \$16 adults; \$14 seniors; \$6 students ages 5-18, free for children under 4.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: www.longwoodgardens.org; (610) 388-1000.

OF INTEREST: In addition to bonsai, you will find exhibits of Ikebana (Japanese flower arranging) and Ameriseki (viewing stones), as well as the ongoing Chrysanthemum Festival.

Bonsai: Good specimens look as if nature did the sculpting

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Ittel has chosen and trained plants by visualizing how they might look in miniature form. Some have been dug from the wild, others were yard plants neighbors no longer wanted, and some specimens came from nurseries as "starter" plants.

After 20 years of study and experience, Ittel knows how to spot a prospective bonsai plant.

"Look for flow, movement, and layers," he says, pointing out the lovely curved trunk of a plant-in-training, whose open branch structure shows great potential.

"Start with small, inexpensive nursery stock like garden junipers (*Juniperus procumbens nana*). Stock up at end-of-season sales and then prune away.

There is a bonsai in every one of them – you just have to cut away the unnecessary portion and the bonsai will emerge," he says.

The concept of removing all but the most important parts of the plant reflects an essential Japanese philosophy toward bonsai.

Historically a Chinese art, known as penjing, that dates back almost two thousand years, it was introduced to Japan around the 12th century through Zen Buddhism. The Japanese refined the art, paring it to its basic elements and defining it to reflect harmony between man, the soul and nature.

Bonsai wasn't introduced to the West until the early 1900s and to Americans during the post-war era. Not until the 1960s did Americans travel to Japan to study the art under Japanese bonsai masters.

Its popularity is now worldwide, but the appeal, Ittel says, tends toward older practitioners.

"Bonsai takes patience and relaxation, which do not fit with current instant-gratification trends. I find it to be a very relaxing form of meditation," he says. He often heads straight for the back yard after a hard day at work.

Maintaining bonsai trees can be just as in-

involved as regular gardening, with less weeding. Pruning, pinching and re-potting are vital to the trees' health, as is soil structure and watering.

Because the object is to keep the specimen small – typically anywhere from 3 inches to 3 feet tall – bonsai requires not only pruning branches but roots as well.

Like regular gardening, pruning occurs in early spring, but plants are typically repotted every other year.

In addition, branches and trunks must be wired so they grow into the desired shape. By pulling the branches downward, wiring helps achieve the goal of "aging" a tree.

"Only the perceived age matters," says Ittel, adding that leaving dead wood on the tree (known as jin) contributes to the look of an "old" tree.

For the soil, Ittel uses a mixture of Turface, a fired clay soil conditioner, turkey grit and pine bark.

The combination is very coarse and water runs through it, allowing for the circulation of air around the roots to prevent root-rot.

Because bonsai trees are planted so shallowly, they must be watered more frequently.

Bonsai also requires its own set of tools, and in his basement, Ittel unrolls his implements like a surgeon about to operate. "This is a diagonal cutter," he says, lifting what looks like a gigantic cuticle trimmer.

Bonsai specimens usually fall into one of five specific styles – formal upright, informal upright, slanting (or windswept), semi-cascade and cascade. They can also be planted in "forests," or groupings of several trees of one species.

Moirra Sheridan is a Wilmington freelance writer and gardener. She is a graduate of the University of Delaware's Master Gardener program. Reach her at masher9@juno.com.



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