



NEWS FROM

SUMMER HILL

Winter/Spring 2005

Japan

Ann and I went to the southwest again last fall - searching out native American ruins and visiting trading posts to add to our collection of pots or "jars" as they are called out there. But I've written about this before.

Of real interest was Ann's trip to Japan in November. It's too bad we can't include her photographs. For you she wrote the following:

While I listen to a CD of Japanese koto music I embark on a short article about Japan's gardens seen on a tour with Brooklyn Botanic Garden in November. Between reading, seeing, and remembering, there is too much to say! China influenced all Japanese art forms, including the gardens. By the 11th century, Japan was no longer exactly copying chinese forms, but looking at their own natural elements. I would say they borrowed concepts and worked them into their own vocabulary, depending on each individual garden's materials. Later, Zen Buddhism, also from China, was to translate into another design, that of the solo rocks placed on raked white sand.

There are several garden types. "Strolling" gardens have vistas; foreground, middle ground and background. The largest we saw was Kenroku-en in Kanazawa. It was enormous, and famous for very old pines with branches trained far out over the water, held on wooden braces. Also in Kenroku huge structures are placed every fall, like huge tepees over large trees then tree branches are attached, helping contain the weight of snow. This garden also had a pine whose roots had been bared for many seasons, as they grew downward, so now the roots form a sculpture so large that

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Rambling with Rayona



Last summer Rayona Hobbs joined Summer Hill Nursery as our roving customer representative. Last fall she visited many of our customers to get acquainted. The following are some thoughts she had after these visits.

This past fall, I had the very lovely job of driving around beautiful New England and getting to know many of you and your businesses first hand. Honestly, I cannot think of a more perfect job and the insight that it gave me is truly amazing. I wish that I had done the same sort of thing some years back when I was president of the Connecticut Nurserymen's Association because the diversity and scope of the term "garden center" doesn't come close to describing what you all have done to the retail end of the "green industry." As much as I would like to think that I was a "hands-on" kind of president, there is nothing like talking one-on-one with an individual to understand why and how they do business the way that they do.

The very first thing that struck me was the actual physical size of your businesses. The range runs from hundreds of acres of old farmland to less than 10,000 sq. ft. of rented space. The buildings run the gamut of multi-storied, climate controlled show places to a simple open-air "shack" with an "honesty box" attached to the front. The nursery stock consisted of thousands of pieces from many sources to

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Plant Notes

Spiraea x 'Mini-Gold'

Although we've discovered and introduced many plants over the years, Spiraea x 'Mini-Gold' may be one of the most interesting for the gardening public. The group that was here for our open house last summer saw it, and I hope were impressed. It has a habit very similar to Spiraea japonica 'Alpina' - tight, slow growing and small leaved. However, the foliage is an excellent yellow that carries right through the summer into the fall. I've had several planted in our garden for two summers now, and they are continuing to show this tight habit. The more I see them, the more impressed I am and feel very fortunate to have found this plant. The original is in an area not too far away from a Spiraea japonica 'Alpina' and a Spiraea x 'Gold Mound' so it could be a hybrid between those two. While we don't have enough on hand to take orders as yet, I do plan on putting one in each order we ship this spring, hoping that you will plant it and let me know what you think of it by the end of the summer. We've propagated quite a few this past year and if it holds up as well as I think it will, we will be listing it in this summer's catalog for sale this fall and next spring.

This is a plant that probably could be patented; however, I have a distinct aversion and dislike of anyone patenting a plant that they discover. In my mind, such a discovery is a gift of nature that should be shared by the industry and the public without patent restrictions. All we'll ask is that you retain the name, Spiraea x 'Mini-Gold', and give us some credit if the opportunity comes along to do so.

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you see people dwarfed on the other side. Kenroku also had a villa which we visited, a well preserved example of Japanese architecture, with all the artistic refinements. Screens opened on all sides to separate private gardens.

Another garden element is the "borrowed landscape". This describes gardens that used the hill or the woods outside the actual garden to move the eye beyond, to add dimension, size and actually influence the design of the garden.

Most gardens had water. Water was everywhere in Japan, seeping out of the hillsides, in the rice paddies, and roadside streams. Ponds, lakes, and waterfalls were part of many gardens. Some also had "dry cascades", which is the simulation of waterfalls, by rocks placed in motion down a hillside, into a bed of stone, giving the impression of water. The loveliest example of this was Tenryuji garden. Not only was there a large dry cascade, built with special textured rocks down a hillside, but this formation was reflected in a real lake at the bottom. In many gardens, reflection was used as an artful tool, especially with the maples in fall color. Very deep red, brilliant against so much green and rather free form compared to many of the clipped shrubs.

Antiquity always is present, in lanterns; rocks chosen and moved to the site from past gardens; ancient trees trimmed and trained, highlighted by moss and lichens climbing the branches. Many severely clipped (Mike calls "tortured") azaleas were trimmed in tight balls. Gardens were combinations of much discipline (like the people) and some spontaneity in an overall feeling of "natural". Very little "wild-

ness" as we know it, yet overall effect was "flowing" even though tightly controlled.

The gardens were quite miniature, but giving the illusion of space by clever design and use of perspective. These elements to me were the brilliance of Japanese design.

Most gardens, especially in Kyoto, were connected to a temple. They can be as subtle as Daisen-en, which actually told a story as the four small gardens wound around the temple. Tight little rectangles of raked white pebbles told the "stream of life"; the first bed with a boat shaped rock, moving next to a stream flowing under a stone bridge by a dry cascade, all part of the journey; next section around the corner more implied landscape by rocks and a few small plants, opening at last around the last bend to a large area of white raked pebbles symbolizing the sea, the end of the stream/life.

Ryoan-ji is a zen-inspired garden with a long white raked bed with five rock groups, enclosed by a 500 year old earthen wall. A viewing step ran along the garden where people sit or move about to see the rocks from different perspectives. The influence of Zen Buddhism, as well as the Tea ceremony, was prominent on the gardens of Japan. Ryoan-ji, like many other temple/gardens, had beautiful old artwork on the inside panels of the temple within the garden.

Some gardens are better experienced on a drizzly day, as the textures and colors of rocks and lichen are more pronounced. Shozan Garden was one. An intimate and small place with mossy roofs and tiny paths through trees severely trimmed, their curling trunks covered with cyan colored lichens and dripping moss. Upon learning these trees were cherry, I could only imagine

their beauty in the spring. The soft pink against all the dark green and mossy background must be spectacular.

The most moving garden for me was the Moss Temple, where we actually had to be part of the religious "sutra" ceremony, tracing calligraphy on little desks on the floor, while monks chanted and drums beat in the background. The garden is over 600 years old, and the entire floor is moss. Many different mosses. Actually, most gardens were of moss, and I saw no "lawns" or any trace of lawnmowers. Grass is wild on the country hillsides, with bamboo and Cryptomeria, but not domesticated. The Moss Temple is a strolling garden of 4.5 acres, through ponds and trees, and a hillside with a dry cascade. There is much water in which everything is reflected; islands with a rock or a fern the size of a shrub, the tall clipped trees, many maples in fall color, bridges of ancient stone, totally covered now in bright green moss. The garden was reflected from every angle many times over.

A serenity and reverence pervaded this garden. Even with many people visiting at once there was still a sense of serenity and reverence, peace and beauty no words can really describe.

Both the pride of work and the Japanese obsession with order was reflected in the many workers in every garden, moving across the land with brooms and rakes, cleaning every pine needle and fallen leaf. They were dressed in uniforms separate to each garden, but all wore rubber boots, aprons, hats and white gloves.

Writing this piece, and seeing my photos, I wish I could visit the gardens again at a more leisurely pace. They are one of my "life" experiences; so balanced, so poetic and serene. Each one its own total world - perfect beauty.

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Spring Hours: 7:30 - 4:30

Holly Johnson - V.P. Sales & Admin. John Nassif - V.P. Production

Betty Allen - Office Manager

Mike Johnson - Newsletter Editor, etc.

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less than 10 one-gallon Albertas. Many places seem to have a theme working for them. A couple of examples would be a kind of road side farmers market, a more formal English garden atmosphere, an active greenhouse growing operation and a truly unique healing, spiritual place offering classes in Reiki, Yoga and herbal uses. Obviously, there are as many creative ways to make a garden center as there are creative folks running them.

The next thing that I noticed almost everywhere was that this industry seems to embrace both the need and the value of the "baby boomers," both from a customer standpoint and from a worker opportunity. Obviously there are many times when the attribute most needed is a young strong back. There is, however, lots of room for the patient, reliable, knowledgeable, older worker.

Another facet of your garden centers that I loved, is that many of you are incorporating FOOD in your product mix. For some, it was as simple as offering a basket of apples as a "help yourself" snack. For others, fresh fruits, vegetables, homemade pickles and jams, even fresh baked pies were part of the offerings. Oh, yummy. At one place on the Cape I was able to buy a couple of apples for a snack, a bottle of maple syrup to give as a gift, and a pecan sticky bun for my breakfast the next day. How does it get any better than that? Again, this makes sense to me as a tie-in product. Plus, think of the favor one would be doing for moms with hungry kids in tow. Fresh, healthy snacks at hand and a chance for the mom to shop a little longer. Another twist on this idea is that many of you have things made by local craftsmen. Wooden birdhouses, flower themed jewelry, handcrafted note cards, beautiful paintings and photos are among the many offering that I saw. To my mind, this is not only a wonderful showcase for these talented people, but also a way to offer one-of-a-kind gifts and souvenirs to visitors to our areas. Who needs another T-shirt from Wal-mart made in a foreign country?

These are but a few of my thoughts that I had as I traveled around and looked and learned from each of you. I sincerely thank everyone for taking the

time to share yourselves with me and look forward to seeing you again soon. Oh, by the way, the sticky bun did not last to the next town, never mind breakfast the next day!

Plant Database

Our website continues to grow. While many of you took advantage of the updated Availability Lists last spring I think more of you will enjoy the plant database that is under construction.

In March we will start entering information from The Plants We Grow. This will be an ongoing process with updates whenever a new plant is added to our price list. Since we have a large number of unusual plants that are hard to find in literature we hope this will be a helpful tool.

BAMBOO

Now that we have been selling bamboo for a couple of years, we are beginning to learn what species, and varieties within species, are going to be in demand. It seems that hardiness is the major deciding factor for most of our customers buying bamboo. When it comes to *Phyllostachys*, we have customers very interested in *P. bissetii*, which is probably the hardiest of the bamboos we grow, along with *P. nuda*. Also, the *P. aureosulcata* varieties are popular because they can withstand low temperatures as well.

P. nigra is popular, even though it is tender. I believe this is because it has been described recently in gardening articles and the black culms certainly are spectacular. I cannot recommend it though for most of southern New England except in the warmest areas. We have several of the named varieties of *P. nigra* on the place but will probably discontinue them because of the hardiness factor. If you are interested in any of the lesser known varieties of *P. nigra*, please contact me now because while we have these plants on the place now, we may not in a year or two.

Regarding the ground cover types, it seems that *Sasa veitchii* is the most

popular with its "variegation". I put "variegation" in quotes because it only shows up in the fall. This "variegation" is just the outer margin of the leaf dying, giving a variegated appearance. The other ground cover types, such as *Pleiblastus distichus*, don't seem to be popular at all. But in my estimation they really should be, because they provide good ground cover in shady areas that need to be mowed only once a year. Mowing should be done in early spring to get rid of the old growth so the new growth will come up and give a nice appearance.

One disturbing factor with bamboo is the appearance this year of Bamboo Mealy Bug, which I've been told by the Experiment Station was discovered only two years ago. It appears to have attacked only two species of bamboo here - *Fargesia murielae* and *Fargesia denudata*. We feel that we are getting close to 100% control with the use of Flagship, a systemic insecticide. You will want to look at the base of *Fargesia murielae* or *F. denudata* if you have these plants (the ones you get from us should be clean). If you see mealy bugs down near the base, under the sheath, it is Bamboo Mealy Bug. This could become a problem if not treated. I will let you know more about this problem in the future.

Another problem rearing its head on the bamboo front is the news that flowering on *Fargesia nitida* is more widespread than thought a year ago. We've yet to see any flowers on the clones we have, but we have backed off propagating *F. nitida* from our old stock. We have seedlings of the new generation on hand and have propagated those this winter. We are still selling the older generation of *F. nitida* but are warning customers that flowering could occur. If we do get flowering here, we will let you know as soon as possible. Of course, it would be interesting for us to collect seed and propagate some seedlings of our own.

Bamboo sales have been strong, and a lot of interest has been shown. Our main project now will be selecting the varieties people want and growing more of those and fewer of the less popular ones.

This excerpt is from the New England Nursery Association's winter newsletter. It might be of interest to non-NENA members.

KNOW YOUR NEIGHBOR



Holly Johnson
Vice-President
Summer Hill Nursery

Professional designations: I am a CT Accredited Nursery Professional

Educational background: I received my B.A. from the University of Colorado

Service to nursery industry: I have served the nursery industry for 13 years and am the current past president of the Connecticut Nursery & Landscape Association.

Description and type of business: Summer Hill Nursery, Inc. is a wholesale-containerized nursery offering over 800 varieties.

What is unique about your business? We are unique due to our desire to focus on growth in improving quality and choice of material. While we list many traditional favorites, we also specialize in some lesser known, but very interesting plants - from Albizia to Zenobia there is something for everyone.

What was your first job in the nursery industry? My first job was working on a potting crew before being moved to the

propagation department to learn how it all starts.

Who was your mentor and why? My mentor would have to be my father, Mike Johnson. He has set a good example for me my whole life through his hard work, love of his work, and continual desire to learn more.

To what do you attribute your success? I attribute my success to the people I get to work with - from my co-workers I get an incredible amount of support and knowledge and I am lucky to have interesting, quality customers.

What has been your biggest challenge in the past 3 years? I would have to say my biggest challenge has been dealing with government and insurance issues. Both seem to continually increase in both quantity and time demands.

How was business this year? 2004 was a very good year for us. Our business stayed steady all season long.

How does this compare to the past few years? 2004 was a much stronger year, primarily due to all the sunny weekends in the spring. Our business was affected by the weather much more than the economy for the last several years.

What are your 5 favorite plants? Usually the last 5 plants I looked at. Since I recently finished my fall yard work I'd have to choose:

Fothergilla gardenii, Dwarf Fothergilla
Hamamelis x int. 'Arnold Promise',
Arnold Promise Witch hazel
Hydrangea anomela 'Petiolaris',
Climbing Hydrangea
Juniperus formosana, Formosa Juniper
Picea orientalis 'Nana', Dwarf Oriental
Spruce

What is the most useful product, service and equipment you've come across recent-

ly? We keep things pretty simple at Summer Hill, but a few helpful items have been:

Product: The grip lip container from Nursery Supplies has been wonderful on the fingers.

Service: Improvements in our payroll and accounting software that no longer requires me taking time to call for service.

Equipment: The addition of simple hand-carts for customers to use in our sales yard. (The field crews even found them handy when packing in this fall.)

What trends do you see that may have future impact on the nursery industry? I believe the issue of invasive plants will have a great impact on the nursery industry. As each state begins to legislate which plants businesses cannot grow or sell, we will be faced with the challenge of educating the consumer on the issue while interesting them in substitutions we can provide.

Leisure activities: I enjoy traveling, hiking, working in the yard - basically anything that keeps me outside.

What has your involvement with NENA meant to you? NENA has offered me a great opportunity to meet nursery professionals from throughout the region. I have learned from their experiences in their respective states, and also been afforded the opportunity to become friends with many interesting people that I would have otherwise not had a chance to know.

One of the many benefits of NENA membership is interaction with fellow members from across New England. If you would like to discuss any of the information in this article, please feel free to contact your NENA neighbor.

LOCALLY GROWN? THAT IS THE QUESTION!!

As if dealing with the invasive plant issue wasn't enough, a new, potentially greater problem faces the nursery industry today. By now, everyone should know at least something about *Phytophthora ramorum*, also known as Sudden Oak Death Syndrome. Although not much is known about this disease, it apparently has the potential to wreak havoc with many of our native tree and shrub species in New England. The magnitude of possible destruction is not known; however, the potential is there to exterminate certain species from our landscape. Already, two shipments of nursery stock from the West Coast to Connecticut contained plants infected with *Phytophthora ramorum*. There is little doubt that environmentalists will soon make an issue of plants entering this region that could be infected with this disease, and concerned customers at the retail level will be demanding locally grown plant material to avoid possible infection of their property.

It is no secret that many growers on the East Coast find it more economical to buy plants grown on the West Coast and immediately resell these plants to garden centers, landscapers, etc. Before you ask us, I want to let you know that we have never done this. All our plants at Summer Hill have been grown here at least one full growing season. I have always felt that we have enough trouble explaining problems with our plants without having to determine and explain problems with other people's plants. At Summer Hill, we propagate approximately 95% of the plants we grow either by seed, grafting or cuttings. The other 5% are liners that we buy to grow at least one year, in some cases five or six years. Of those, 95% come from nurseries east of the Mississippi River. All our broadleaf evergreens, including rhododendrons, are propagated and grown here. We do buy maple understock and a few grafted maples from the West Coast (also bamboo which is not affected by the disease), but that's it; and they are grown here at least one summer before we sell them. Therefore, before you ask us, let me say that all our plants are locally grown in Madison, Connecticut.

If you have any questions about this, please give us a call.

NEWS OF SUMMER HILL PEOPLE

At the CNLA's Annual Meeting in January, John Nassif, our Vice President in charge of production, was honored with the Association's Award of Merit. This is the highest honor given by the Association and is the result of many years of hard work. John served on several committees, the Board of Directors, and as Association President in 1996. We all congratulate John knowing this is an award that was truly deserved. Holly Johnson presided at the meeting since she was President of the Association. It was a great pleasure for her to give this award to John since they have been co-workers here at Summer Hill for many years.

A milestone was reached for Chris Barton who celebrated his 30th anniversary with the Nursery on January 13. Chris has been a very important person in the Nursery - mechanic, electrician, plumber, leader of the shearing crew, in charge of loading trailers and the many other jobs that need to be done in a nursery this size. We all thank Chris for thirty years of service and hope he has many more years here with us. We don't know what our 37 Farmall cubs would do if Chris wasn't here seeing to their repair every winter.

Mike Johnson and Betty Allen have been serving as Executive Director and Corresponding Secretary of the Connecticut Nurserymen's Foundation for the past few years. Mike has served the Foundation for nine years and has handed his resignation to the Board saying that he is "running out of steam". He has enjoyed being on the Board and also being Executive Director of the Foundation, seeing it grow from nothing to being able to send four scholarship recipients to college each year. However, he feels he has too many other projects going on at this time to do a good job and is ready to step aside. If anyone in Connecticut is reading this and would like to take on the job, he would be more than glad to talk to them about it. If possible, Betty would like to stay on as Corresponding Secretary when the Board finds a new Executive Director.

Three Great Plants for the Next Price List

Calocedrus decurrens, Western Incense Cedar, is a spectacular, upright, somewhat columnar and pyramidal, evergreen that has a rough texture. It really has to be seen to be appreciated - a great plant for a specimen planting or background in a conifer garden. Incense Cedar will get quite large. The one we are propagating from here at the nursery is over 30 feet tall, planted about forty years ago. Incense Cedar is thought to be tender by many, but the one we have here withstood minus 18°F in 1980 and showed no damage whatsoever. It is a wonderful new addition to our line. I've been wanting to get enough production to list *Calocedrus* for years but just never got to it. However, this fall we should have quite a few in 3 gallon containers.

Another tree that will get fairly large, if given time, is *Larix kaempferi* 'Diana'. I've often thought that, in general, larch are not that great a landscape plant since they resemble dead spruce trees during the winter months. However, *L. decidua* 'Pendula', the pendulous form that we sell, gives very interesting shape and form even without its needles. *Larix kaempferi* 'Diana' is another larch that is even more interesting. It is vigorously upright growing but with twisted, contorted branches that can even outdo *Corylus avellana* 'Contorta'. The other day I was walking past our plant of *L. 'Diana'* and saw the branches outlined on a snowbank - it was really quite a sight. This is a plant that should be used as a specimen or in a prominent spot in a conifer border.

The third plant that we will be listing this fall for the first time is a real beauty - *Sophora davidii*. This is a very rare plant - I wrote about it in Additions to the Plants We Grow last January but did not list it for our plants were too small. It is a shrub or small tree with very small, pinnately compound leaves giving it an airy appearance. When it is in bloom, with blue and white flowers, it is a knock out. (Check out page 47 in Additions to the Plants We Grow - 2004)

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WINTER/SPRING NEWSLETTER 2005

PLANTS FOR THE FAR DISTANT FUTURE

A couple of very interesting plants were found here in the past six months. Last fall, on the edge of the nursery, we found a rather large *Hamamelis virginiana* that has been there for years. We have all walked by it each fall, but it wasn't until this year that one of our employees noticed that it had red flowers. In looking through the literature, I don't see any other red flowering *Hamamelis virginiana* listed. We've grafted a few this winter, and we will see what comes of it. If anyone knows of another one that is named and in the trade, I would be interested to hear from them. This will not be a spectacular plant for the average gardener, but it is definitely something for collectors and those very interested in different plants.

The other plant, just discovered a few days ago, is an understock that overcame a *Cornus kousa* graft and grew quite large in one year. The trunk and branches are contorted, and it is going to be interesting to see what this one does as it gets larger. It could be a spectacular plant or it could also be spectacularly ugly - time will tell. We will keep you posted.

Spring Pick-up Orders Please FAX or Phone

This coming spring, if you would like to pick up a few plants from us that have not already been ordered, we would appreciate receiving a FAX of your request before 8 o'clock in the morning, or a phone call, letting us know what you would like. We will get back to you and let you know exactly what we have available. With all the varieties we are growing, it takes some time to check on availability (computers don't go out into the field and count). After April 20, if you want to come to the nursery and assemble an order from our surplus area, that is fine; but if you know the items you need, it is much better to call ahead for it could save you a trip if we don't have them available. In any case, if we can assemble the order in advance, it will save you quite a bit of time as we can load you as soon as you get here.

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