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5 listings

Laura and Tom Dufala have become a trusted resource for mature specimens that convey an instant air of tradition and history to a Japanese or Northwest-style garden. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

Bentwood Tree Farm

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

IT'S SAID THAT if you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life. Based on their shared obsession with Japanese gardens and traditional pruning techniques, Laura and Tom Dufala haven't worked a day in 40 years.

You can't run a nursery without contributing significant time and physical labor, but that doesn't keep them from enjoying the heck out of it.

Bentwood Tree Farm, located in Boring, Oregon, is a true passion project for the couple. The farm fills a very particular need for retail and wholesale customers — hand-

trained and cloud-pruned trees and shrubs that bestow a garden with distinct character.

The farm is 4 acres, with 2.5 in production, harvesting about 225–250 pines each year. When asked how many employees they have, Tom smiles and counts to four, pointing to himself, Laura, Ray, and Sam. (Ray and Sam, the two resident dogs may excel as official greeters, but they can't help a lot with the pruning.)

However, they do have customers who volunteer to prune — more on that later.

Bentwood Tree Farm focuses on a choice selection of trees and shrubs, mainly evergreen, that thrive with intense pruning. In



Bentwood Tree Farms has a focus on cloud-pruning or Niwaki techniques on pines. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

September, the availability list included six pines, *Chamaecyparis pisifera* ‘Filifera’ and *Ilex crenata* ‘Convexa’, in various sizes ranging from 12 inches to over eight feet tall. Their potted bonsaied pines are sold in places like **Portland Nursery**.

Sometimes Bentwood will offer Japanese maples and other deciduous trees, but pines, led by *Pinus nigra*, are the main players.

The couple has become a trusted resource for mature specimens that convey an instant air of tradition and history to a Japanese or Northwest-style garden.

Bentwood’s customers include landscape designers, contractors, public gardens, nurseries, and private gardeners. The couple’s handiwork — often donated — is growing in public gardens at Duke University, Gresham Japanese Garden, Ashland’s Lithia Park, the **Oregon**

Garden in Silverton, and Oregon State Penitentiary’s Healing Garden in Salem.

The nursery sells mainly along the West Coast, although it has been known to ship to the Midwest and Southeast.

“We’re definitely what you call a niche,” Laura said.

“It’s ridiculous, actually,” agreed Tom, laughing. “No one does this unless you really like it a lot.”

Their unique model is driven by a strong mission to promote the beauty and art of Japanese gardens.

In the beginning, there was bonsai

Tom and Laura each have more than 40 years of experience in the growing industry. Laura grew up on a potato farm in Idaho, where her mom cultivated a Japanese garden. She remembers even at a young age asking every year if she could

help prune the pine trees. She moved to Oregon at 18 and worked on her brother’s carrot farm, but it was when she joined a burgeoning conifer nursery that she got her wish.

It was in the late 70s and Laura was working at **Iseli Nursery** when founder Jean (“John”) Iseli noticed her interest in collecting and pruning pre-bonsai starts.

“He was an artist first. A lot of people don’t know that. That’s how we bonded. He was probably an early aesthetic pruner. He definitely mentored me, and I was kind of his teacher’s pet,” Laura said. “I was the only person he took pruning in the field for several years.”

She also met Tom at Iseli Nursery. Tom who holds a degree in horticulture, went on to work as a horticulturist in City of Portland Parks Department. Laura’s bonsai fever was contagious, inspiring >>

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Bentwood Tree Farm

Tom to learn more about Japanese design and pruning. The pair married in 1984.

The idea took root in Laura to start a bonsai business, but she wasn't interested in selling conifer bonsais as houseplants — a tricky operation at best — which was the trend at the time.

Like their pines, their business has taken a few directional twists in direction. Laura began growing bonsai and pre-bonsai liners under the name Black Sheep Bonsai in 1982.

In 2000, a friend at Portland's Japanese Garden suggested they grow pines — and the nursery was reborn as Bentwood Pines with a focus on cloud-pruning or Niwaki techniques on pines. It evolved into Bentwood Tree Farm in 2011.

"We just took all of the bonsai crop I had at that time and just tossed them all on the ground for starters," Laura said. Tom points out this is a common bonsai technique to "age" the plants in the ground to bulk up their trunks. They harvested those starters almost two decades later. "Neglect was our greatest tool," Tom jokes.

They continued applying and adapting bonsai techniques to in-ground specimens, a departure from some Japanese tree pruning, which encourages a single slant in the trunk. The Dufalas cut and customize bamboo stakes and tie branches with twine to bend the pines, working to reveal their inherent beauty.

They eschew zig-zags as too contrived, they say, but train or prune out any hint of verticality.

"It's kind of a dialogue with the tree," Laura said. "You're following the energy of the tree. You know that tree is telling you the direction it wants to go, you just follow it, accentuate it and work with it."

Why pines?

Laura said Japanese garden design has three main features: rock, water, and pine tree.

"One of the reasons why the pine tree is such a focal point is because it has so much beauty in its trunk. Where the trunk meets its root system, that's called the *nebari*. And then as you go up through the



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branching and structure, of course the bark itself, and the branching and how it appears like a cloud, and you can see the structure of the branch. And so what that does in a garden is, it causes you to slow down and kind of relax. It gives you the feeling of wanting to read the story of the tree.”

In addition to suiting Northwest-style gardens, pines grow exceptionally well in the Willamette Valley. The farther east you get, pines are easier prey to humidity and pests, like pine bark beetle and sequoia pitch moth. That’s another reason they mainly ship locally.

Tom calls the nursery “basically organic,” using horticultural oils and mechanical controls as much as possible.

They prefer to purchase two-year seedlings and will sell them from three years to about eight or nine more years when they reach approximately seven feet tall.

The two also work to spread love and appreciation for Japanese-style gardens. They are active in the North American Japanese Garden Association, and they volunteer their time teaching the adults in custody at the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, Oregon, how to prune the trees in the prison’s Healing Garden.

It’s all in the wrist

Laura said their style of aesthetic pruning, which she calls more Western-influenced, differs from traditional Japanese in that it creates fuller branching and “clouds” near the base, and creates a tree that stays more compact. Compared to topiary, it’s much healthier for the tree, because the thinning allows more airflow in the canopy, she said.

“You’re going to have a tree that stays in context,” says Laura. “You can keep that tree in that landscape forever if you continue to prune it and maintain it, and then it looks attractive.”

The trick is that the trees require consistent pruning in winter and spring, using specialized techniques.

In spring you remove all the “candles” on the pines in spring, which forces back budding forming the clouds. Midsummer may require a second candle break, but perhaps only taking half to let

some clouds form. Fall and winter brings selective pruning to open the canopy and needling (removing discolored needles). There’s some flexibility, but Tom says, “If you miss several cycles, you’ll end up with a beautiful Christmas tree at the top of their tree.”

The couple recommends customers start their new tree off right by hiring an aesthetic pruner for the first year or two. Many are willing to teach the homeowner how to maintain the tree themselves.

Those who are really committed can train with Tom and Laura. Many of their customers volunteer to prune at the nursery regularly, some for years, unofficially, or as an apprentice-in-training. Some have gone on to become aesthetic pruners.

“A lot of urban people that have gardened in the past, that do not have gardens now, who really have been into bonsai, don’t have trees, so they come out,” Tom said. “I’ve got one gentleman, Dave Wheeler, he comes out once a week like religion. Spends the whole day.”

Although Dave has refused pay, Tom has been known to sneak some cash into his bag.

Despite all the work through the year, they can’t wait for the high pruning season when they get to let their inner artists out.

“It’s a really truly like a lot of nursery and landscaping, a labor of love,” Tom said. “Laura and I really love pruning. We think, ‘Oooh it’s going to be November soon.’ We get to start pruning again, and we’ll be out here at 36 degrees.”

Notice the phrase “we get to” prune again.

Laura added, “I’ll bundle up sitting on our garden bed pruning all day long and just content. Totally content.”

“She’s a machine,” Tom said.

Considering the future, Tom said “I just turned 69. My focus is to share our pine pruning passion with friends and customers. Shaping and twisting pines is a craft that Laura and I will pursue until the last pine is bent.” ©

Erica Browne Grivas is an award-winning journalist and gardener pushing some boundaries in Seattle, Washington. She can be reached at EBGrivas@gmail.com

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