

**The 50-Year Journey of
an American Bonsai Pioneer**

Bill Valavanis' love affair with bonsai

By Marc Arpag, USA

Photos courtesy William N. Valavanis and friends.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Marc Arpag is an American Bonsai Artist, long time student and friend of Wm. N. Valavanis. He is a board member of the Bonsai Society of Upstate New York and co-founder of the Suiseki Study Group of Upstate New York. His love of nature and art have also lead to his study of Japanese garden design and was honored to create the Welcome Gardens for the U. S. National Bonsai Exhibitions.

Marc has won numerous awards including the Yuji Yoshimura Award, the BCI Award for Outstanding Bonsai and the ABS Finest North American Bonsai Award at the 2nd U.S. National Bonsai Exhibition for his Eastern White Cedar Bonsai.

International Bonsai Master William N. Valavanis has reached an amazing half-century of bonsai passion and dedication. Known around the world as “Bill” due to his down to earth approach, unbounded good nature and unequalled knowledge of all things bonsai. Bill has made friends around the globe from novice students to the most recognized names in the art of bonsai. These days the title “Bonsai Master” is thrown around and even taken by people that have no understanding of what a true master is. A true master never gives himself that title, it is one that is earned and understood by those who have studied in the same discipline and recognize it.

To truly appreciate his 50-year milestone, we must look beyond a quick glance at a staggering list of achievements. Bill’s “love at first sight” turned into a life-long love affair with bonsai. When his journey began, he had an unquenchable thirst for all things bonsai and anything related, as he still does today. The Bill Valavanis of today is even a more dedicated student than when he began 50 years ago. To understand his devotion to study is to begin to understand this great man. Imagine, a never-ending quest for knowledge and insight that followed every known source. Attending two colleges and achieving degrees in ornamental hor-

ticulture was only the start to a life long dedication to studies of classical bonsai art. Bill studied with classical bonsai royalty in Japan: Kyuzo Murata, Kakutaro Komuro and the Father of Saikei, Toshio Kawamoto. He also studied the art of ikebana during those early years in Japan. In 1969, he began his study with Yuji Yoshimura for 30 years in America. Yuji’s father was a cofounder of the Nippon Bonsai Society and a renowned authority on bonsai, display and suiseki. Young Bill Valavanis drew from the hearts and minds of these great men.

From an early age Bill not only had an unquenchable thirst for bonsai and learning as much as he could, he also wanted to share what he was learning with others. It is a mark of all great teachers that they never stop learning and love to share their passion and inspire others. Bill has always promoted bonsai and not himself. Like his teacher Yuji Yoshimura, Bill has devoted his life to teaching and sharing bonsai. Looking at all his bonsai pursuits, we find a common thread of education running through all of them. It is clear that this is deeply woven part of his fabric. Both in his studies and in his teaching Bill has literally covered the globe many times over. Twice a year he travels to Japan and has attended the Kokufu-ten over 30 times! These are always extended study sessions for multiple full days of the same exhibition. Year after year, he also returns to study bonsai in the greatest collections around the world and always shares with his students and magazine subscribers. It is sometimes easy to forget where things come from and where credit is due. The brand “International Bonsai”



Korean hornbeam, *Carpinus turczainowii*, trained from a tree collected in the mountains of Korea since the early 1990s. Beginning with a heavy trunk and a couple of branches, fine twigs have been lovingly developed through the decades.



belongs to Bill in the literal, figurative and legal sense, he truly lives it and owns it!

International Bonsai has been the most anticipated magazine to be received 4 times per year for over 35 years by Bonsai lovers in 50 countries around the world. Each magazine is a treasure trove of photos, educational ideas and special features. They are a resource that one never tires of and are referred to many times over the years. Looking back it is interesting to see how they continue to improve just when you think they can't get any better! Behind the scenes, there is a tremendous effort, including many "up all night" sessions, to produce this superb publication.

Bill's passion and affection for bonsai has sprouted in many directions. As an artist, he has won many awards but even more importantly, he has created bonsai of unparalleled beauty and refinement. His new book, *Classical Bonsai Art: 50 years of Bonsai Passion*, illustrates the development and exquisite refinement of a selection of 100 masterpiece bonsai. Always true to his mission of bonsai education, Bill shares the details of his thoughts, techniques, history and development for each tree. During a recent seminar at the International Bonsai Arboretum, Yasuo Mitsuya said that he has noticed an emphasis on new techniques that are focused on doing things faster. He lamented that the focus was not on doing things better, just faster. Bill's focus is on achieving excellence and provides a welcome alternative to quick and easy techniques offered on the Internet. Online it is easy to be fooled about the quality of trees. The opportunity to view a Valavanis tree in leaf and with bare branch's clearly confirms that his methods and affection for his bonsai create the excellence he seeks.

As an author, contributor and publisher, his work has expanded, diversified and refined over the year. These works serve to further illustrate both a dedication to excellence and a tireless desire to improve.

Bill has the most extensive personal library of bonsai books, magazines, journals and photographs likely in the world. In his library is every issue of *BCI Bonsai & Stone Appreciation*, *Bonsai: Journal of the American Bonsai Society*, and *International Bonsai* as well as many Japanese and European periodicals. On his shelves are almost every Kokufu-ten exhibition albums and many, many, rare old Japanese books and other exhibition albums. He has dedicated an entire room and half of another with floor to ceiling shelves that serves as an ever-expanding resource. In his archives are over 70,000 images and he draws from both for his many educational programs, presentations and articles. Several years ago Bill's house was destroyed in a fire. His mother was the only one home at the time and was safely evacuated by a neighbor. When Bill arrived home, the fire was raging and flames were shooting out. Once he learned his family was safe, he thought of his beloved books and raced into the burning house to rescue



Top; Mr. & Mrs. Kyuzo Murata with their daughter in law at Kyuka-en Bonsai Garden in Omiya, Japan, are commenting on photos of Bill's bonsai in June 1985.

Middle; Yuji Yoshimura and Bill Valavanis worked together to give many educational programs. During this program, guidelines for evaluating classical bonsai were presented at an International Bonsai Symposium in the early 1990s.

Bottom; Corin Tomlinson formally apprenticed with Bill Valavanis for several years at the International Bonsai Arboretum in Rochester, New York, as part of his horticultural degree program at Merrist Wood College in England.



them. When the firefighters arrived, they found Bill running in and out with arm loads of books. Many of these books were priceless, irreplaceable historic treasures. The firefighters tried to stop Bill from going back, fearing for his safety. Undeterred he told them, "either arrest me or let me finish." Some books were ultimately lost to fire or water as well as a number of boxes containing slides but a great deal of bonsai history was preserved thanks to the devotion of this life-long scholar. Offers to help were received from around the world as friends learned of his loss.

Bill has faced health issues that have caused him to break bones, wear casts, braces and use a scooter or crutches to get around. There are witnesses around the world that can testify that this may be inconvenient but it has not slowed him down. In fact, he is even faster on his scooter and it seems to please him.

From house fires to health issues, he has faced many obstacles and challenges, each one overcome. Many times during his life he has been told something could not be done and of course he chosen to do it and do it well.

There was a void in bonsai in the USA that was talked about for many years, the lack of a national exhibition. It was said that it could not be done; it would be impossible. Bill decided to accept the challenge and risk so the first U.S. National Exhibition could be born on October 10, 2008. There have been two more, June 12–13, 2010 and on June 9–10, 2012. The fourth is scheduled for September 13–14, 2014. They stand as historic and important milestones in American bonsai and the exhibition albums among the finest ever published in quality of photographs and reproduction.

Bill has never followed sports but he does share something with world-class athletes. When fans think they could perform like these athletes, what they see is only the performance, not the dedicated training, study, commitment and sacrifice that come first. Like

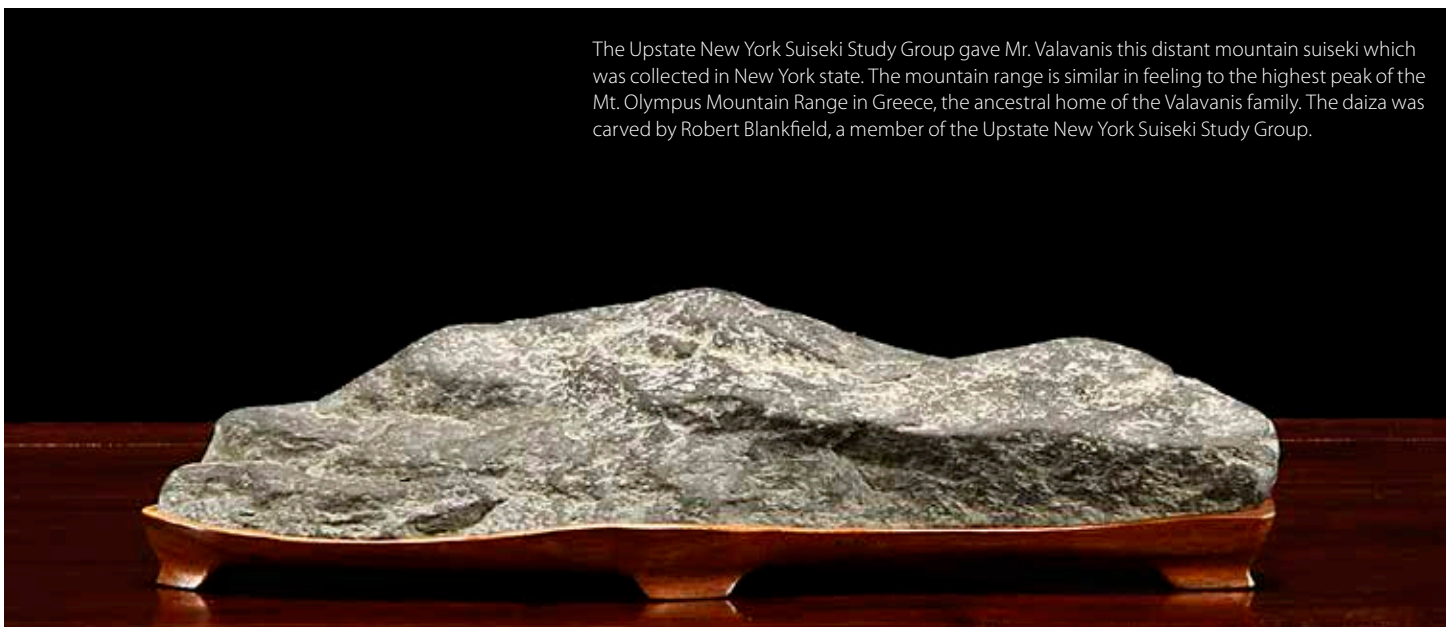
those world class athletes, Bill makes what he does look easy. Not because it is, but because of the enormous effort in preparation that comes first. This is true of all Bill's endeavors.

International Bonsai Symposiums, Seminars and Colloquiums have been providing in-depth and broad-ranging bonsai learning and fellowship for thousands of attendees for over 30 years. During that time, over one hundred world-class bonsai artists have shared their expertise and many young artists were given there first opportunity to reach a large audience thanks to Mr. Valavanis. Topics of special interest such as shohin bonsai, suiseki and display have been offered to broaden the appreciation of these arts.

The art of suiseki has long been appreciated by those in bonsai and it is an art that Toshiji Yoshimura shared with his son Yuji. Yuji Yoshimura authored the earliest suiseki book in English and also shared this knowledge, insight and love of suiseki with Bill. Through his magazine with in-depth features as well as many seminars, workshops and lectures, and through his involvement with the International Viewing Stone Symposiums, Bill has been instrumental in the growth understanding and appreciation of the art of suiseki. Bill is also a cofounded and the spiritual leader of the Suiseki Study Group of Upstate New York.

Top; Tamogawa water pool stone from the Valavanis Collection. When Yuji Yoshimura was 19 years old (1940) he rode his bicycle from his father's bonsai garden in Tokyo to Omiya Bonsai Village and purchased the suiseki from bonsai master and suiseki authority Kyuzo Murata. At that time it was estimated to have been appreciated by bonsai and suiseki lovers for about 150 years. Mr. Valavanis purchased the suiseki at Yoshimura's auction in 1975. The custom made storage box was hand crafted by Sean Smith and the history of this suiseki was written on the inside box cover in Japanese by Seiji Morimae.

Middle; During the summer season the Tamogawa water pool stone is displayed in a bronze water basin.



The Upstate New York Suiseki Study Group gave Mr. Valavanis this distant mountain suiseki which was collected in New York state. The mountain range is similar in feeling to the highest peak of the Mt. Olympus Mountain Range in Greece, the ancestral home of the Valavanis family. The daiza was carved by Robert Blankfield, a member of the Upstate New York Suiseki Study Group.



Top; Koto Hime Japanese maple, *Acer palmatum* 'Koto Hime,' trained from an air layer rooted in 1986. This bonsai was originally the top of the bonsai featured on the cover.

Bottom; Dwarf Scots pine, *Pinus sylvestris* 'RAF,' trained from a container grown young seedling since the early 1970s. Five days were necessary to prepare this bonsai for the 2013, 36th Midwest Bonsai Show at the Chicago Botanic Garden where it placed First in the Professional Division.

Mr. Valavanis is also a great supporter, ambassador and friend of bonsai in the USA and around the world. In the past two years alone, he has done more for bonsai than most professionals will in their lifetime. With teaching and study engagements, he has crossed the Pacific Ocean eight times this year alone. He has authored three important books, *Bonsai Fine Art and Nature*, *3rd US National Exhibition Album* and *Classical Bonsai Art: 50 Years of Passion*, during this short span as well. He has held the International Bonsai Colloquium, another Symposium, the 3rd US National Exhibition, as well exhibiting and promoting the new "Winter Silhouette" Show in

North Carolina. He has also attended many regional Bonsai events to teach, exhibit and participate as a vendor. He has hosted two more Suiseki Study group Exhibitions as well as continued as an organizer of the International Viewing Stone Symposium held in Harrisburg, PA. There is a saying if you want something done, give it to a busy man. Bill has found time to teach basic, intermediate and advanced bonsai in his studio, start a local bonsai meet-up group and create a new blog making frequent and fascinating posts to "Valavanis Bonsai Blog, Welcome to my Bonsai World!" His blog currently has had close to 50,000 visitors already. Bill is also very active in the Bonsai Society of Upstate New York and is currently Vice President. His contributions are the primary reason this group is 150 members strong and contributes so much to the bonsai community. Bill is active with his church and provides flowers and displays during the year as well as helps out with the annual Greek festival serving great food to festival goers.

Our local landscape association has been blessed with Bills leadership and support of the annual "Garden-scape" show and also "Garden Artisans." Serving on planning committees, as a judge for displays, giving demos and lectures as well as creating award-winning displays of bonsai in garden settings, the local community is a better place too.

The International Arboretum is treasure to all who come to marvel at the collection of some of the finest bonsai in the USA. Highly developed and refined specimens as well as the tokonoma displays have amazed visitors from around the country as well as the world. It is here that Bill has introduced many cultivars to the USA and also where you can find the Valavanis Cypress in bonsai and in the landscape.

William N. Valavanis is much like the masterpiece bonsai he has created. His "nebari," or his roots, are deep and widely radiating having drawn from the best sources. His trunk, the body of knowledge and insight to this art, are full of character and continue to widen and branch out. His branches, areas of interest, continue to develop, ramify and refine, as does his quest for insight while sharing with the world.

In June 2013, a special Colloquium and Exhibition celebrating Bill's 50 years of bonsai creation and passion was held in Rochester, New York. Countless hours were spent in preparing and planning the display. No detail was overlooked. The relationship of all bonsai, pots, stands, accents, suiseki and memorial elements were considered. The result was amazing harmony and beauty that created a magical atmosphere. At the banquet, Bill was presented with two special gifts. The first, a beautiful green bound hard cover book of letters expressing appreciation and congratulation's from friends around the world. Lettered in gold was the title "William N. Valavanis 50 Years of Passion." Ronald Maggio presented the book to Bill on behalf of those who wrote.

Seiju elm, *Ulmus parvifolia* 'Seiju,' trained from a young field grown plant since the early 1980s. The well tapered formal upright trunk without a visual break stands firmly on the well developed surface roots. Dedicated trimming for many years has developed excellent twig ramification.





*Top; Seigen Japanese maple, *Acer palmatum* 'Seigen,' trained from a young grafted tree since the early 1970s. The intense red foliage contrasts sharply with the dark blue container. This bonsai received an "Exceptional Tree Award" in the 2013 World Bonsai Friendship Federation Photo Contest.*

*Bottom; Silverberry, *Eleagnus pungens*, trained in the two line cascade style. The handmade American container by Ron Lang was a gift to Mr. Valavanis to commemorate his 50th year of bonsai study.*



The second was a custom, handmade, commemorative bonsai container made by Ron Lang. The pot was commissioned by a group of Bill's loyal friends known as "the Crew." Jon Robbins and Marc Arpag presented the pot to Bill.

Yuji Yoshimura's daughter Emi, shared with me the following, *"Recently, I think about what my father tried to teach to everyone through bonsai. I think it is not just skills. Through the beauty of bonsai he wanted to convey the respect for nature and through the hard efforts in making bonsai, I think that he wanted to show that it would develop ones inner self. I am still thinking about this"*.

Bill is the embodiment of the true spirit of bonsai friendship, respect, love of nature and people and development of inner spirit shared through bonsai. I know that his teachers are as proud as we are thankful.

We are all fortunate that William N. Valavanis continues to share his passion and creations with the world! 🌳



Red leaf hornbeam, *Carpinus laxiflora*, trained from a young container grown seedling by Mr. Valavanis for over 35 years. It has received numerous awards since 2006 and in 2011 the Best of Show at the combined convention of Bonsai Clubs International and the American Bonsai Society.