

Couple auctions 100 bonsai trees to benefit Oakland's Lake Merritt gardens

The trees from Dennis and Joanne Makishima's personal collection drew bonsai lovers from across the state. by [Saskia Hatvany](#) July 13, 2022



Gordon Deeg, director of the Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt, directs the auction at the garden center on July 9, 2022. Over 100 trees from Dennis and Joanne Makishima's private collection were auctioned to the public, and a further 500 trees were up for sale following the event. Credit: Saskia Hatvany

When Dennis Makishima started collecting bonsai trees about 40 years ago, he always had an ending in mind. That ending finally came last Saturday, when he and his wife Joanne donated their entire collection of hundreds of bonsai trees to the Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt for public auction.

In the makeshift auction room at the Lakeside Park Garden Center in Oakland, bidders peered under the canopies of the sculptural trees lining wood-paneled walls. Some trees towered over the crowd, while others were small enough to fit in one hand. By 11 a.m. the room was packed. Over 100 bonsai were to be auctioned off, and 500 more awaited in the adjacent room for a post-auction sale.



Bidders inspect the bonsai trees up for auction at the Lakeside Park Garden Center Center on July 9, 2022.
Credit: Saskia Hatvany

George Haas, the Marketing Manager of the Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt, said that the 200 auction seats were gone within two hours.

“We turned a lot of people away, unfortunately,” Haas said.



Bidders file into the Lakeside Park Garden Center Center where over 100 of Dennis Makishima's plants were up for auction on July 9, 2022. Makishima is a celebrity in the California Bonsai Community for his involvement in teaching, clubs, and his impressive collection. Credit: Saskia Hatvany

The first tree, a medium-sized maple, sold for \$400. The second, a pine with branches that cascaded below the pot into a lace pattern, sold for \$1500 to Bob Pressler, who traveled from Los Angeles to attend the auction. Pressler, who owns Kimura Bonsai Nursery, has been collecting the plants since he was 10 years old. At the auction, he purchased one tree for his personal collection and a few more that he plans to work on and later sell in his nursery.



Over one-hundred trees lined the walls at the Lakeside Park Garden Center on Saturday, July 9, 2002, for a historic bonsai auction and sale that raised over \$130,000. Credit: Saskia Hatvany

“These trees have been in pots for decades and they’re really really old, and there are things we can do to make trees look old but there’s a quality they get when they’re in pots for a long time that you can’t get any other way,” Pressler said.

On the auction block were a few dozen black pines from the mid-1950s to early 1960s. Many of them are believed to be planted from seed in the 1950s by Japanese Americans after they were released from World War II internment camps.



An auction attendee bids for one of Dennis Makishima's donated bonsai trees at the Lakeside Park Garden Center on July 9, 2022. Makishima was instrumental in the establishment of the Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt, which opened its doors in 1999. Credit: Saskia Hatvany

Makishima, who chose not to attend the auction, said that many of the Japanese Americans in California before World War II were gardeners, and pine seeds were readily available to them. He said they often used affordable techniques to shape the trees, such as bending the branches with fishing weights instead of wire, and using fish emulsion for fertilizer.

"I inherited a lot of stuff from the old Japanese American community, and you don't inherit pristine things," Makishima said. "It took me a long time—20 years—to restore these."

Oakland resident Alexis Miller holds a bonsai tree that she purchased for \$20 at the sale following the auction on July 9, 2022, where the trees ranged greatly in size and age. The auction was already at capacity by the time she arrived so she attended the post-auction sale instead. Credit: Saskia Hatvany

That's partially why Makishima knew he wanted to donate his collection while it was at its peak. He had seen many bonsai owners become too old to care for the trees, and had watched their collections suffer as a result. He made a promise to himself that when he turned 75, he would pass his collection along as well. So when he turned 75 in February, that's exactly what he did.

"My collection was at its height as far as maturity, completion of the artistic goal," Makishima said. "I'm passing them along to whoever can continue the tradition."



The

California Juniper bonsai tree that received the highest bid of the day and was sold for \$4,400 sits in the auction room at the Lakeside Park Garden Center on July 9, 2022. Credit: Saskia Hatvany

The [tradition](#) began in China, and later was adopted and transformed by the Japanese who gave it the name bonsai. The trees are planted in shallow pots and meticulously pruned and trained over the course of their life to achieve the desired shape. Almost any plant can be trained into a bonsai tree with enough patience and skill, although certain varieties and characteristics are highly prized. Native species are often used as they stand a better chance of surviving local conditions. Gardeners will sometimes collect a variety of species from the wild, which are called yamadori, potting and pruning and training them to become bonsai. Makishima's collection had a variety of pines, maples, junipers, cedars and California yamadori native trees.



Ray Giron poses with the bonsai he bid and won for \$600 dollars at the auction on July 9, 2022. Giron said he has been collecting for over 30 years and has over 200 trees. Credit: Saskia Hatvany

Makishima has deep ties to the Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt, which opened in 1999 and was the brainchild of local horticulturists [Toichi Domoto](#) and Bill Hashimoto. Makishima helped create and build the garden that he calls a “museum,” where many of the bonsai started out as neglected trees donated by members of the community.

According to Haas, the auction and sale of Makishimas’ collection raised over \$130,000—a record-breaking event for the Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt. Proceeds will fund the Dennis and Joanne Makishima Curator Fund which is dedicated to the Oakland garden. The auction was organized and run by volunteers from various Northern California Bonsai Clubs, including the East Bay Bonsai Society and the Marin Bonsai Club.

The highest bid at the auction was for a California Juniper tree — a large specimen with a thick and dramatic twisted trunk. The tree sold for \$4,400. Donald Dang, a 20-year bonsai collector who attended the auction as a bidder, said that the tree’s value is likely due to its bark rather than its shape.



From left, Melissa Southwood and Martyna Dakowicz pose with their newly purchased bonsai plants on July 9, 2022. Southwood is an avid houseplant collector and has several rare houseplants, but she is new to the world of bonsai. Credit: Saskia Hatvany

“One of the reasons the California Juniper is valuable is because its twisted wood shows it had been living in a very harsh environment—thus its beauty. The deadwood of light color and the live wood of dark color are intertwined together, and it matches with an ancient Asian philosophy of life and death,” Dang said.

Of his impressive collection, Makishima kept only three trees, and he said that soon he will likely only have one. Eventually, he plans to part with that one too. “I’m relieved because I have no more bonsai in my backyard,” Makishima said, following the sale. “I’m moving on with another phase of my life now. I had 40 wonderful years, no regrets.”

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