

The story of the Shimpaku juniper

Its Secret History

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It is astonishing to realize that the Shimpaku juniper so beloved for bonsai culture was first found only a little more than a century ago in Japan. But in that short time, due to over collecting, the Shimpaku growing in the wild have vanished!

When and where were the Shimpaku discovered? Who collected them from the mountain cliffs and how did they do it? What happened over those 100 years to these collected masterpieces? Do any Japanese bonsai nurseries still have collected Shimpaku for sale today?

These and many other “secrets” about the Shimpaku are revealed in the fascinating article that is being published on this website. This article was written by **Kazuki Yamanaka** and recently published in Japanese in the June 2003 issue of **Kindai Bonsai Magazine**. Due to a generous donation from **Daizo Iwasaki**, WBFF’s Vice-Chairman, WBFF obtained permission from the publisher to translate the article into English and publish it on the WBFF website. We thank **Ikuyo Shisaka** for her sensitive and faithful translation of the original Japanese text into English. The English text has been edited for the benefit of non-Japanese readers and reordered for a more chronological presentation.

Chapter I - Discovery of Shimpaku

Today, the Shimpaku junipers growing in the wild in Japan face extinction. These junipers are only known to exist on Hokkaido and Yakushima Islands, and extinction is said to be certain if very strong steps are not taken. The Shimpaku is a variation of

Chinese juniper (*Juniperus chinensis*, or Ibuki or Byaku-shin in Japanese). Its Latin botanical name is *Juniperus chinensis* ‘sargentii,’ named after C.S. Sargent who identified it on Hokkaido in 1892. The Japanese botanical name of the Shimpaku juniper is Miyama-Byakushin. It belongs to the family CUPRESSACEAE which also includes the Hinoki cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*). Categorized as a conditional limestone plant, it is also sometimes found in areas rich in the mineral peridot.



The tree on the right is called “**Noble Satake’s Shimpaku.**” It was such a rare specimen that, after it was collected, it was initially named “The Smoke of the Volcano.” This name described realistically its powerful swirling trunk and Shari. This was one of the best Shimpaku bonsai, but regrettably it died during the devastated period after World War II.

Nowadays, because virtually all of the naturally-grown Shimpaku have been exhausted, it is impossible to find a Shimpaku with such character. So many famous trees have been lost, but at the same time many stories about Shimpaku have been born.

In "Bonsai Gahou (Magazine)" No. 5 (September 1907 issue), there is a discussion of the origin of Shimpaku bonsai. It says that in 1889 a bonsai lover, **Rokuro Ohta**, obtained a juniper bonsai that reminded its admirers of a famous painting of "Kanzankokai" (an old Japanese cypress in the winter mountain). The rumor spread among the traders that "this is the authentic (=shin), oak (=paku)." Thus, the juniper was named "Shinpaku." (Accounting for the conventions of Japanese word combination, it becomes "Shimpaku.") This word was not known in either the Chinese or Japanese language and so the name "Shimpaku" was conceived within the world of bonsai as a new variety of junipers.

Shimpaku junipers have been popular since the 1890s, but for some time they were appreciated as one of the Kinseijyu group like *Rohdea Japonica* (Omoto), or were considered too thick and too heavy in appearance. Even so, this juniper has had an extraordinary popularity since its very first appearance. Its popularity gave birth to enthusiastic collectors such as **Tason Ohata**, and from the beginning almost all the major bonsai lovers devoted themselves wholeheartedly to this juniper. Indeed, by 1900 the Shimpaku juniper became accepted as one of the classic species used in bonsai.

During the early years of its popularity, there was an extreme shortage of Shimpaku, particularly compared to the mainstream trees used for bonsai at that time, such as Japanese red pine

(Akamatsu), Japanese black pine (Kuromatsu) and Japanese cedar (Sugi). As a result, you could have boasted of having it whatever the quality. If the Shimpaku was really of high quality, it would cost you a fortune, and the exorbitant price resulting from the rarity of Shimpaku seemed to be its destiny. Many of the best Shimpaku inhabited only inaccessible cliff areas, and thus they were very difficult to collect. Behind the scenes of the brilliant popularity of Shimpaku bonsai, there were collectors risking their lives. Shimpaku, the fascinating tree, has a hidden history which will be revealed in this article.

Chapter II - First Shimpaku: "Ishizuchi Shimpaku"



Mt. Ishizuchi is the highest peak on Shikoku island

It is said that the first Shimpaku to be collected in the wild came from the Ishizuchi mountain range on Shikoku Island. This is an area in which collectors had, for a long time, obtained Japanese red pine (Akamatsu) and Japanese black pine (Kuromatsu) for use in bonsai. These collectors included experts in mountain collecting who had extensive experience and knowledge of transplanting and growing new roots on collected specimens. It was one of these collectors who found in the mountains for the first time a form of Chinese juniper that would later be called Shimpaku. Chinese junipers grown in pots had been appreciated for a long time. If the Chinese juniper he had found was suitable for pot plantings, he felt he could not miss.

Wasting no time, this collector dug up the juniper, transplanted it into a pot, and then brought it to a bonsai trader in the town of Takamatsu, which faces the Seto Inland Sea on the northern coast of Shikoku. At that time, Takamatsu was one of the centers for bonsai material from Shikoku, and traders would come to buy not only from Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe, but from as far away as Tokyo. The Chinese juniper variation that became known as Shimpaku first became popular in the Kansai region, and its popularity soon reached Tokyo. This is because a skillful trader from Kunpu-en Garden made good ones available, which impressed those persons having good taste.



Northern Shikoku - showing Takamatsu

The golden age of Ishizuchi Shimpaku existed during the Meiji period from around 1868 to 1878. The aesthetic sense of people of that time toward Shimpaku was greatly different from that of today. In a word, they yearned for a taste of the mountains. The Jin and Shari of the Shimpaku were not greatly appreciated; instead, they were deeply impressed by the natural posture of these junipers fostered by their growing in the mountains. Those with extreme twists and turns were not in fashion, but instead they sought those expressing age in a subtle and tasteful manner (shibui). Indeed, the pictures from the Meiji period show that there was almost no trace of branch shaping. They exercised restraint in pruning the Shimpaku as much as possible, and they did not peel off the soft outer bark of these junipers or polish their trunks.



Shimpaku bonsai of Meiji Period

The way they cherished the Shimpaku was similar to that of antiques. Ishizuchi Shimpaku, compared to Itoigawa Shimpaku which came later, had an untamed but sensitive shape and, since they could just be planted in a pot and be appreciated, they became very popular. Many were of medium size and thus were perfectly suitable for bonsai.



Shikoku Shimpaku bonsai were appreciated for aged trunks with not too much movement.

Chapter III - Collecting Ishizuchi Shimpaku

At the beginning of their popularity, Shimpaku were everywhere in the Ishizuchi mountain range and one did not need many tools. Many Shimpaku could be found and were easily dug up. As the demand for Shimpaku heightened, excessive collecting began to occur. At the time, there were no restrictions on taking plants from the mountains, and collectors from all over Shikoku went into the mountains in droves. They included not only the professional mountain hunters but also those people with a taste for bonsai and even ordinary people seeking a quick profit. As a result, in only 20 years the Ishizuchi Shimpaku in their natural state were virtually extinct. They even began to take the trees left in the rear mountain area of Besshi and those left growing on the cliffs.



Shimpaku bonsai of Meiji period



The collectors went to the mountains in pairs. Each person took two thin ropes and two thick ropes, and a special pickaxe illustrated here. The pickaxe is a very functional instrument, but it could prove to be a dangerous tool in unskilled hands. First, one of them - the hunter - would tie a rope around a tree at the top of a cliff and then climb down using the rope as a life-line. The other person - the spotter - would look down the cliff with a pair of binoculars to see if he could find a favorable Shimpaku. Once sighting a good specimen, the spotter would inform the hunter by waiving a red flag. According to the spotter's instructions, the hunter would use his pickaxe to help him move about on the wall of the cliff. Sometimes the hunter would swing his body into the air away from the wall to reach a distant corner of the cliff face. This activity was very dangerous, for if the rope snapped, it could be the end of the hunter's life. Upon reaching the right tree, the hunter would break apart any impeding rocks, uncover the tree roots, and by using the edge of the pickaxe proceed to cut the roots to release the tree.

During the period 1903 -1908, there were reportedly accidents in which both the spotter and hunter would slide down the face of the cliff, one after another. Most of these victims were either miners from the Besshi copper mine, employees of wealthy merchants or others who were not bonsai professionals.

In the first decade of the 1900s, Ishizuchi Shimpaku was priced from ¥200 to ¥1,000. Today, that would translate to a value of several million yen to tens of millions of yen. (Today – Sept 2017 - one million yen would equal about US\$10,000.) It was natural to

lose one's sanity because of the Shimpaku's high value. But, there were also collectors who appreciated bonsai and did not sell their collected Shimpaku but kept them for themselves. Thus, there were countless wonderful specimens which could be found in the residences of ordinary people in Takamatsu, Niihama, Saijyou and Imabari.

Although **Kuransouke Fujita of Niihama**, **Tahei Suzuki of Doi** and so forth were known as the famous professional hunters, there were countless semiprofessionals doing business with local persons having a taste for bonsai or with large-scale merchants in Takamatsu. However, toward the end of the Meiji era (1912) when Ishizuchi Shimpaku became exhausted, some people sought out Korean Shimpaku for resale by crossing the sea. Thus, around 1908, almost all the Shimpaku sold around Takamatsu included Korean specimens. However, these Korean junipers were called "Shikoku" Shimpaku because their quality was so good and could hardly be differentiated from Shikoku Shimpaku. People then spread specimens to Kyushu, Yamato, Kishu, Koushu, and so on. When the news went out that collected Shimpaku were available, the collector-dealers of Shikoku would be the first to arrive. Some of these collector-dealers also journeyed out to look for any unknown new area where the Shimpaku might be still growing in the wild. This group of collector-dealers knew the value of Shimpaku and had acquired the knowledge to collect the specimens.

Mountain collecting is similar to hunting. Once having acquired a taste for it, people might never have been able to return to stable jobs such as farming, nor be able to become a merchant. They would find themselves longing to wander in search of prey. As for Shimpaku junipers, by the early 1900s trying to collect them by climbing aimlessly among the mountains was like trying to grab clouds. By that time, there was almost no possibility of finding any Shimpaku growing in the wild. But, there was one man who possessed extraordinarily good luck.

Chapter IV - Famous Collector, Tahei Suzuki

This lucky man was born in 1865 on the eve of the Meiji Restoration, at Doi in the Ehime province (presently Doi-cho, Ehime Prefecture). Doi is located along the route of a pilgrimage between Kawaone and Niihama, and had been a post town since the Edo era (1603-1868). Although it can be said that it faces the Seton Inland Sea, there are some low mountains that actually block its view of the sea. Since the area lacked open plains, it could not produce much rice, so instead the main food staple was yam. In addition to yam, the mountains yielded such precious gifts as edible wild plants, mushrooms, and firewood. From the latter part of the Edo period when bonsai became popular in Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe, as a secondary means to earn money people began to collect pre-bonsai material and were successfully collecting young trees of Japanese red pine (Akamatsu), Japanese white pine (Goymatu) in the neighborhood mountains, such as Mt. Kumataka, Mt. Akagi, and the Akashi mountain range, which brought collectors comfortable earnings.



In the western side of the town of Doi, there was a community called Sekigawa which had a lot of families whose name was Suzuki. During the Meiji era, there were many bonsai dealers among the Suzukis who brought down seedlings of Akamatsu or Goyomatsu for bonsai from the mountains and sold them to dealers in Takamatsu or to people who had a taste for bonsai.

During the first decade of the 1900s, **Tahei Suzuki** (pictured above) wandered all over Japan seeking Shimpaku. While traveling by ship on his way back from Hokkaido Island, he saw Mt. Kurohime in the Northern Japanese Alps. Mt. Kurohime is made of limestone and he found an abundance of Shimpaku there. That story has been retold repeatedly through the years. From Mt. Kurohime to the Aikomi plains to the Hiyodori pond, he walked on the ridge and reached the summit of Mt. Myouji, and was astonished by the view below him. It was a huge colony of Shimpaku surrounding Mt. Kurohime. What he saw were countless numbers of Shimpaku jostling one another on the wall of the mountain, exposing their Shari of pure white.



Tahei's first collected Shimpaku.

All of the Shimpaku from this general area are called Itoigawa Shimpaku — a reference to the town of Itoigawa (in what is now Niigata Prefecture on the western coast of Honshu) where these Shimpaku were bought and sold.

When you see Mt. Kurochime from the side of the Himekawa River, it looks like a woman donning a loose robe. The mountain was named for Kurohime

(Black Princess), the ancient Nunagawa Princess, who was renowned for her intelligence and beauty. At the summit of Mt. Kurohime, there is a small stone shrine dedicated to the princess, and many people climb the mountain on the day of the annual festival on April 24. At the foot of the eastern side of the mountain, there is a large limestone cavern called Fukugakuchi (which means where good fortune lies), and legend has it that the princess lives there.

Tahei Suzuki would have soon learned about the legend of the Black Princess. He certainly had luck beyond his dreams by finding such a bountiful supply of Itoigawa Shimpaku that he could never finish collecting them all. Tahei's intense passion toward Shimpaku even caused such friction with others that they began to call him "Eccentric Tahei." It is said that because he clung to the rocks for so long when he was collecting in the mountains that his arms and legs became so distorted that he had difficulty doing everyday things like eating and sleeping.



Mt Kurohime from Shimizukura where Taihei lived

Mt. Myouji and Mt. Kurohime, which are connected at the summit, are made of limestone and have similar vegetation. Both of them also have the best valleys of jade in their bosoms. Mt. Myouji stands at a little more than 1,000 meters above sea level as does Mt. Kurohime, and is less impressive than the other summits found in the Northern Japanese Alps. Mt. Myouji is not difficult to climb if you know the way to go. During the fall, if you take one of the mountain trails, you can enjoy hearing the crunch of dried leaves under your shoes as you walk up the mountain.

But this Mt. Myouji is no ordinary mountain. On its southeast side, it has a wall that looks as if it had been cut with a knife. It is almost always covered with clouds and gets a good deal of both snow and rain. The wall can be very easily viewed from the mountain route leading to the Takanami-no-ike pond to Otaki. From this vantage point, the rock climbers clinging to its walls resemble little ants. World famous climbers such as Tsuneo Hasegawa (1947-1991) trained himself on the walls of Mt. Myouji and made renowned the southeast route.



Mt. Kurohime and Mt. Myouji are made of limestone.

However, it must be said that the first people challenging this wall were not the adventurous mountaineers like Tsuneo Hasega, but instead were the Shimpaku hunters. Even today, many rock-climbers who climb Mt. Myouji keep diaries on a website in which they mention the word "Shimpaku." Also they say they can still find evidence of mountain climbing pitons or worn out rope embedded in the limestone walls, left behind by Shimpaku collectors. Skilled climbers have expressed amazement when they sometimes find these remains in what they consider to be inaccessible overhangs having more than a 90 degree incline.

The mindset of a Shimpaku hunter and a mountaineer are different. They both carry only the minimal necessities, but the Shimpaku hunters also must be able to carry a Shimpaku on their back. The Shimpaku hunter also may be more focused on the business of collecting, while the mountain climber is in it purely for adventure. But things are never so simple. The collectors risk their lives too, and they cannot be hunting Shimpaku merely for profit.

Chapter V - Collecting Team of Tahei and His Brother Fukuji



Mt Myouji around 1925

When Tahei Suzuki took his younger brother, **Fukuji**, to Mt. Myouji for his first time, Fukuji thought he was dreaming. But there they were Shimpaku junipers as far as he could see. For the first few years, he and his brother sent the trees they collected back to Shikoku and tried to root them there. But because the trees were traumatized by the long transportation period before they were transplanted, their success rate was very low.

Around 1912, realizing they had to do something to increase the survival rate of their collected trees, Tahei moved to Shimizukura which is located at the foot of Mt. Kurohime, and Fukuji moved to Kotaki, at the foot of Mt. Myouji, so they could collect the Itoigawa Shimpaku and transplant them locally. They invited **Aikichi Ozaki** from their native community on Shikoku to assist them with shaping the trees after new roots had been established. They also invited several other local people to aide them in collecting the specimens. One young man named Kumeji Ito from Kotaki assisted them from the very beginning and improved his skills dramatically.



Taihei's workshop

During the Taisho era (1912-1926), because of the abundance of the Itoigawa Shimpaku, the Suzuki brothers were able to pick only the very best specimens. While there were many masterpiece bonsai that survived, there were also many that died. One of the reasons for this was that the Shimpaku junipers were located on the cliffs and their roots had grown deeply into the rock crevices. It was a lucky case when they could remove the rocks and salvage even a little amount of the roots, but in most cases the specimens were collected by tearing off only the trunks. Another problem was that the time of transplanting was often not the best. Since Shimpaku is a robust tree, even one piece of root can continue to live and grow. But if the trees are replanted during the dormant season of winter, they cannot cope with the change and are less likely to

survive. In those days, hunting was done even during winter when there was snow in the mountains, and the trees were dug up and exposed to those harsh winter conditions.

Also there was a problem with the soil used for transplanting and growing new roots. Tahei, for example, had obtained a large quantity of sand from Kiryu (a town close to Kanuma where akadama and kanuma bonsai soils are produced), but this sand has a little acidity. Because Itoigawa Shimpaku junipers grow naturally in a limestone soil, the trees had a difficult time adapting to their new soil. The Itoigawa Shimpaku was different from the Ishizuchi Shimpaku, which was found in the area of olivine rocks.

Having recognized that Shimpaku was profitable, even those who did not know much about plants went seeking them out in the mountains, and this was another reason why so many good specimens were lost. In some cases, junipers that looked less valuable were simply thrown away. "If Itoigawa Shimpaku had been discovered 30 years later," said Michio Kataoka, "the story may have been different." Many first-rate masterpieces disappeared mercilessly.

(In 1910, Tahei reportedly collected the famous Shimpaku later known as 'Fudo', which was between 600 and 1,000 years old. In 1970, Fudo was sold by Kyuzo Murata to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and unfortunately died shortly after it arrived in the United States.)



Shimpaku biting into limestone

Chapter VI - Mysterious Jade Connection

Tahei Suzuki first found Itoigawa Shimpaku junipers on Mt. Kurochime around 1908. Tahei's encounter with jade as he crossed a river to approach the collecting area has been described as follows:

"The river was as clear as it could be, and it was almost scary. The man went through the quick current in the wake of the rainy season. In midstream, he almost fell and, as he did, he grabbed the bottom of the river. The water was up to his chin, but finally when he reached the other side, he found something hard in his hand. Its skin was so blue and smooth from being washed in the river. Putting the jade stone in his shirt, he crawled up the rocky cliff like a spider, and suddenly there were Shimpaku all around him!"

At the western foot of Mt. Kurohime (around the town of Hashidate) and at the southern foot of Mt. Myouji (around the town of Kotaki), there are places called the jade valleys, and even today you can see huge, heavy rocks of jade sitting there. You would not recognize the jade, however, if you were not told it was there. Like limestone or peridot, it just looks like an ordinary rock.



When Tahei and Fukuji Suzuki left their native Iyo (the old name for Ehime Prefecture on Shikoku) and moved to the Northern Japanese Alps, their new homes were coincidentally at the foot of Mt. Kurohime and the foot of Mt. Myouji - and both places are just next to the jade valleys. On the bottom of the Oumi River and the Kotaki River, both of which ran next to their houses, there must have been a lot of jade stones which

tumbled down from upstream. Even though the brothers were attracted by the Shimpaku and not by the stones, they might have picked up some of the stones once in a while.

The colour tone of Shimpaku and jade is mysteriously similar to each other. The whiteness of the Shimpaku's Shari, the redness of their trunks, and the greenness of their needles - all of these are included in the colours of jade. Jade is generally thought to be an opaque stone with green color ("Hi" in the Japanese word "Hisui" means green), but actually there is jade with the color of black or even purple. What is more, some jade is pure white. Most jade has green dots appearing vaguely on its white or pale green base. However, because the surface may often be covered with a dirty brown skin from oxidation, it is difficult for a layman to recognize the stone.



Mt Myouji today

Even today you are allowed to collect the jade stones on the beach, but you almost always are cheated and find only fake jade called Kitsune-ishi (fox stone) which makes you happy for nothing at all. If the stone you find is about the size of a nail, it could be authentic, but you will not find any jade that will constitute a precious gem. This reality is similar to trying to find naturally grown Shimpaku in the wild.

A jade collector once told me the following about the Shimpaku junipers growing in the jade areas: "Yes, the tree's roots sometimes bite into and wrap around the stones. We simply cut off the bothering trees." On the cliffs of Mt. Myouji, there seem to be Shimpaku entangling their roots around the huge stones. Completely and naturally, a rare tree and a piece of precious stone are united. Shimpaku is found by those looking for jade; jade is found by those looking for Shimpaku - both are valuable gifts of nature. Two people thinking about their value may reach totally opposite conclusions. When I told the jade collector how much Shimpaku junipers are worth in the bonsai world, he laughed and replied: "Oh my, maybe I should throw away the stones from now on." But of course, he will choose the stone next time, too. Stone or tree, in either case the attraction runs deep and is hardly influenced by money.

In the Itoigawa area, there were other valuable items to be found. During the period from 1878 to around 1898, gold was extracted from the Kanayama-dani valley (closed in 1906). At that time, this small valley was very productive, and a mining tunnel as long as 80 kilometers was dug. Thousands of mine workers lived in the valley, and even a theatre was opened. The valley also produced corundum, garnet, nephrite and so on. However, what brought the largest wealth was limestone which seems unlimited. Both Mt. Kurohime and Mt. Myouji can be said to be made of limestone, and from the Meiji era until today, these mountains continue to be mined. Here you can find suiseki from the Himekawa River. It has a texture of Hakkai-zan-ishi (Mt. Hakkai stone) which has a profound color of darkness with tasteful shapes of uneven surface.

Chapter VII - Drama of Itoigawa Shimpaku

The junipers referred to as Itoigawa Shimpaku up until now in this article were not called



Mt Myouji is the peak on the left

by this name when collecting first began. Before World War II, they were called "Jyouetsu" Shimpaku. They later became known as Itoigawa Shimpaku because they were bought and sold at the Jikishi-in Temple or the Kiraku barbershop in Itoigawa.

Mt. Kurohime was a part of the town named Oumi-cho and Mt Myouji was a part of the Otaki-mura village (in the old zoning). In fact, it was not only these two mountains where Shimpaku grew. Shimpaku also grew in great quantities in the depth of the Kurobe Canyon to the west, in the mountains surrounding Kaitani and Togakushi to the east, in the Hakuba mountain range to the south, and along the coast of Sado Island to the north, the Shimpaku from all these areas became known as Itoigawa Shimpaku. "Noble Satake's Shimpaku" introduced at the beginning of this article is known to have been collected from Kaitani. The Kaitani lineage has soft needles.

Those trees collected from the depth of the Kurobe Canyon (called "Uozu Shimpaku") are said to be as good as that of Myouji in terms of the quality of their leaves and the artistic value of their trunks. (The Kurobe Gorge is the deepest gorge in Japan,

extending for 80 kilometers, or 50 miles. Its peaks plunge some 1,500 to 2,000 meters, or 4,921 to 6,562 feet, to the bottom.

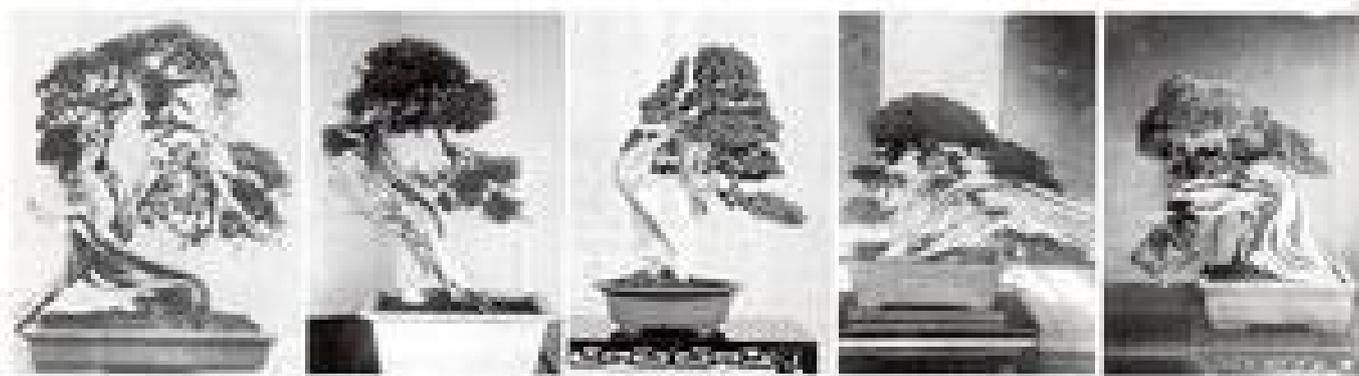
On the other hand, those trees coming from the Korenga-dake high mountain of the Shirouma mountain range are called "Renspaku," whose leaves have a coarse texture and a whitish color. Although Itoigawa Shimpaku characteristically have good texture of leaves, there is no uniformity. There are only a few specimens having all the characteristics sought - the best color, dense foliage, and thinness.



Varieties of Itoigawa shimpaku collected near the Itoigawa river: 1. Sado coast line lineage, 2. Kurohime and Myouji lineage, 3. Kaitani lineage, 4. Uozu lineage, 5. Renspaku lineage, and 6. Togakushi lineage

There is a difference between the Itoigawa Shimpaku and Shikoku Shimpaku regarding the artistry of their trunks. Generally, Shikoku Shimpaku has a trunk that reflects calmness with a well-tamed shape, which is appreciated because of the simple yet profound shapes. There are not many large Shikoku Shimpaku, but they are very attractive in pots. On the other hand, Itoigawa Shimpaku has powerful movement in their trunks and magnificent Shari, and many extra-large specimens exist.

The discovery of Itoigawa Shimpaku totally revolutionized the way bonsai enthusiasts have come to think of Shimpaku. After they appeared on the scene, the Shari of the Itoigawa Shimpaku, which had not previously been much appreciated on the Shimpaku from Shikoku, became one their most admired features. Bonsai lovers were fascinated by the marvelous shapes created by nature, and collectors were absorbed in looking for new rare specimens.



Masterpiece Itoigawa Shimpaku during its Golden Age

By around 1930, almost all the good Itoigawa Shimpaku in easily accessible areas seemed to be gone. The trees previously collected had been located in terrace areas or on gentle slopes. Even getting to these specimens involved difficult vertical climbs, and clearly one missed step could cost a hunter his life. Every morning before embarking on their hunting trips, brothers Tahei and Fukuji Suzuki said prayers at their household Shinto alter, and thanked God upon their return.

The best earner during the Taisho period (1912~) and the earlier years of the Showa period (1926~) was **Kumeji Ito**, a native of Kotaki who assisted the Suzuki brothers in earlier times and was a gifted climber. Kumeji would often go down cliff walls that had no foothold. He collected specimens by crushing rocks with a chisel and a hammer, then digging out a tiny amount of the roots, and cutting out the thick roots with a saw.



Kumeji Ito collecting from rope (before WWII)

As the materials became scarce, the Shimpaku prices climbed. One Shimpaku that Fukuji Suzuki collected in the late 1920s was sold for ¥3,000. With the money from the sale, Fukuji built a mansion made entirely of Hinoki cypress and had it painted with lacquer. Until around 1937 at the outbreak of the Japan-China War, the market price of Shimpaku continued to appreciate. The increasing value of Shimpaku caused many to seek them out.

But by the late 1930s, the easy-to-reach specimens had already been collected. Many attempting to reach the remaining Shimpaku were careless, resulting in countless climbing accidents. Nevertheless, the tragedy of these accidents tended to increase each year because the wealthy families living in Tokyo and other areas were willing to pay the asking price no matter how high.



Shimpaku hunting in the snow (before WWII)

All collecting ceased when World War II broke out. Tahei Suzuki left his house in Shimizukura and returned to his native home on Shikoku. Having reached his mid-70s, he decided to stop hunting Shimpaku and, according to those who visited his home during his later years, he kept only a few bonsai. He and his brother, Fukuji had grabbed the luck that had been bestowed upon them; they both had enjoyed a long life of mountain collecting, and died on Tatami mats.

Chapter VIII - Supply Diminished, Dangers Increased

Following the end of World War II, around 1949, the mountain collecting of Shimpaku junipers resumed. Although there were no guarantees that Shimpaku collected after the war would sell for the pre-war prices, there were still good specimens to be collected. However, collecting from Mt. Myouji required entering into a contract with the public office of the village and was limited to the time from when the snows thawed in the spring until the Myouji festival. The collection period was limited because of the many accidents that resulted from sliding down the mountain in the harsh winter and from avalanches in early spring. As a result, there were very few people whose sole subsistence depended on collecting trees from the mountains.

By around 1955, the Shimpaku worth collecting had dwindled to only a few. Those previously passed over for poor quality were now being collected. And yet, as the bonsai world began to revive, the popularity of Shimpaku came back. By 1975, there were more than 10 mountain collectors and in 1979, the Itoigawa Collectors' Union was organised. This organization paid a fee for permission to enter the mountains to the Kotaki Production and Forest Union and members were allowed to enter between April 12 and June 15.

The leader of the collectors' union, **Tetsuya Nakamura**, began to emphasize safety as a priority. When Kindai Bonsai gathered information for an article on Itoigawa Shimpaku for the November 1985 issue, Mr. Nakamura indicated that he took great care to see that collectors were not injured. According to Hajime Umesawa (the Himekawa-en Garden) who was Mr. Nakamura's friend, "He was sensible and cautious. Since he was such a cautious person, he would knock on the stone of a stone bridge to test it for its durability, and as a result there were few accidents and other mountain collectors had confidence in him."



Shinichi Nakamura (left) and Tetsuya Nakamura (right)

Another active collector at that time was **Shinichi Nakamura**. As Mr. Umewasa recalled, "He was the sort of person who could easily walk around where others had to crawl on all fours.

Because he was a lot older than Tetsuya, I advised him that the time had come to retire every chance I had. But every time he answered, 'What nonsense! I would be the luckiest man if I could die in the mountain. I've already decided that the mountains are the place where I shall die.'" It was as though he were possessed by something. Although both Shinichi and Tetsuya had the family name of Nakamura, they were unrelated. Together they successfully hunted the last masterpiece, "Hiryu" (Flying Dragon), which was also called God's Tree through a magnificent close teamwork.

Although mountain collectors were minimally outfitted, a helmet was deemed an essential piece of gear. This was partially due to the number of collectors who had the confidence to attempt climbing at Mt. Myouji, which increased the danger from falling rocks. Even small stones could cause serious injuries if it hit climbers in its path. Other than Hiryu, most of the specimens collected at this time had small to medium-sized trunks. Collectors would carry in their backpacks one or two trees of these sizes at a time, and only larger specimens were tied to the Shoiko (wooden rack to carry a load on the back) for transport down the mountain.

As the trees were collected, they were put up for auction the very same day. The bases of each of the trunks were tied with grasses, so the condition of the roots could not be determined. Even so, there seemed to be a tacit understanding among bidders not to ask about the condition of the roots. Prices varied but the revenue generated during the three-month period when collecting was allowed was obviously not enough, and most collectors had other jobs to supplement the earnings they made from collecting Shimpaku. Considering the fees that had to be paid and the dangerous nature of the work, it was not the kind of job for those with little determination.

Even Tetsuya Nakamura retired once in 1983. Just four years later, in the spring of 1987, he fell to his death on Mt. Myouji. On May 4 of that year, he had prayed to God at his household shrine as usual, and went to the mountain with his Eisen (a device with claws to put over boots to prevent slipping on ice). There was still snow in the sunken areas of the rocks. "He changed to a new Eisen with which he was unaccustomed, and I believe that's why the accident happened," said Mr. Umesawa.



Southeastern wall of Mt. Myouji

About four weeks later, on June 4, 1987, **Mr. Yamanakajima of Kaitani**, also a mountain collector, was killed in an accident. "It was a terrible year," Mr. Umesawa recalled. And then, in 1998, the last mountain collector, Shinichi Nakamura, died in the mountains. Mr. Umewasa merely remarked:

"That was his destiny." Concerning the circumstances of Shinichi's death, the Itoigawa police office stated that they kept the death records of suicides for only a short time.

Only a decade ago there were still some cases of illegal hunting of the trees, but not anymore. Today there are only the thefts of bonsai. The history of the mountain collecting of Itoigawa Shimpaku thus ended simultaneously with the death of Shinichi Nakamura and the disappearance of Shimpaku from the mountains.

It is estimated that perhaps as many as 20 to 30 people died collecting Shimpaku, but those numbers do not take into account those who entered the mountains secretly and were never heard from again. In a sense, Itoigawa Shimpaku which were collected from the mountains are living now as a tribute to those who collected them and are now gone forever.

Chapter IX - Last Best Shimpaku from Mt. Myouji

The Masterpiece "Hiryu"

It was called "God's Tree" among the mountain collectors of Shimpaku even when it still lived on the rock walls of Mt. Myouji. Named "Hiryu" (Flying Dragon), the base of its trunk measures as wide as 60 cm (about 2 feet). The trunk of Hiryu is carved out by the harshness of nature, giving it a very mysterious shape which is beyond human artistry. Compared to the many outstanding Itoigawa Shimpaku found on Mt. Myouji, the imposing majesty of Hiryu demonstrates that it is truly a masterpiece.

It was 1983 when Hiryu was brought down from the mountain. **Tetsuya Nakamura**, a leader in the bonsai collectors' union, took a central role in collecting this Shimpaku. With several people, he tried to get the tree off the cliff, but because of its large size and heavy weight, they were initially unsuccessful even after a concentrated effort. Although it seemed too difficult to do, they finally developed a detailed plan and, with a strong will, they succeeded in the end.



Itoigawa Shimpaku named "Hiryu"

Considering the fact that by the 1980s, all the naturally grown Shimpaku had largely disappeared from the wild, it was a miracle that such an outstanding specimen as Hiryu was still left in the mountains. This might have been because it was thought to be too big to be a bonsai. There were certainly pros and cons about taking Hiryu off the mountain. The name Hiryu, or Flying Dragon, seems to come from its rough trunk and winding Shari, and they are strangely vivid. Following its successful transplanting by **Naoji Itoh** of Kotaki, still today it is being cultivated and pruned by **Shoshin Nakagame** of Shinzuoka prefecture. Let's look forward to the day when it will appear on the center stage of the world of bonsai.

Hiryu's Sibling



Air-layered from the top of the original tree, Hiryu's sibling is being grown in a wooden box. **Himekawa-en Garden of Oumi** focuses on the mountain-collected Shimpaku of Itoigawa, and keeps quite a lot of these junipers which were some of the last ones to be collected in the mountains. Hiryu's sibling is shown in the photographs above.

Although the above Shimpaku is not as good as Hiryu regarding its artistic level and Shari, the imposing majesty of its trunk is quite something. Since both the front and back have uncommon potential, it is a little hard to choose, but I am told that its owners want to show the side as its front where the root is forwardly rising powerfully. I am told that they are planning to place this Shimpaku in the pot by keeping the front as it is but inclining the trunk a little bit to the left and forward. I am also told that they will cut away the upper part which will be sharpened into three or so stalks of Shari to make them look like blazing flames. This tree has the real potential to become an important work as the last Itoigawa Shimpaku.

We may say that Hiryu and its sibling are the two distinctive trees which bring down the curtain on the 100-year history of mountain collecting the Shimpaku of Itoigawa, which started during the first decade of the 1900s. To be called bonsai, both of them need further training, but they nevertheless have very important significance.

Chapter X - The Shimpaku Protector: Sennichirou Ikehara

Although Itoigawa Shimpaku are prestigious, today there is no way that you can find any of these junipers growing wild in the mountains. Since there used to be so many of them growing in the mountains, I once thought it would still be possible to find some previously undiscovered Shimpaku still growing there. However, after having visited the mountains where they used to grow in such abundance, I was just amazed to find out that there really are none left in the mountains.

But what happened to all of those Itoigawa Shimpaku that were collected in the past? When I had almost given up ever knowing the answer, **Michio Kataoka** (of Kataoka Garden) gave me some precious information. "There is a bonsai devotee - **Sennichirou Ikehara** - who has never sold what he collected," he said. "If you want to see mountain-collected Itoigawa Shimpaku, why don't you go there?"



Mr. Ikehara

I found Mr. Ikehara to be genial with a voice full of life. Wasting no time, he took me where his bonsai were stored. I was just astounded. Perhaps his Itoigawa Shimpaku junipers are locally known but they are definitely unknown to the outside world, and I found that he had first-rate materials one after another in front of my eyes. The patterns on the trunks had been polished out after many years in the mountains, and the marvelous Shari was full of the brilliance that only the authentic ones have.

Mr. Ikehara is 77 years old, with 40 years of bonsai experience and a mind of steel. He takes care of everything himself - repotting, trimming and wiring - with great skill. He is honest and not arrogant, but he is not easily persuaded either, which is an admirable trait.

"There is nothing worthwhile showing you," Mr. Ikehara said, but this of course was far from the truth. I had been told that **Kennichi Oguchi** of Nagano prefecture had once suggested that Mr. Ikehara should open a Shimpaku museum to display his treasures. When I asked Mr. Ikehara if he was going to follow up on Mr. Oguchi's suggestion, he scratched his head and answered, "I don't have the means (money) to do that." He also added, "No, I will never sell them." That's why so many are still in existence locally.

