

Shigo

Shigo is dead. Long live Shigo!

For those who love music, it was Jerry Garcia's death that indicated the end of an era. For star gazers, the death of Princess Di seemed too impossible to be true. For those of us in the business of trees, the news that Dr. Alex Shigo was dead on October 6, 2006, was a personal shock and loss. Dr. Shigo had a profound influence on the field of Arboriculture, and those of us who attended his many classes, workshops and lectures. His passing seems to signal the passing of an era--a golden era for sure. When I told a garden magazine editor that 'Shigo died', he said I spoke of him using one word like 'Cher'. I replied, "one word like 'Lincoln!'"

I had the great opportunity to see Shigo many times. He spoke of himself as not possessing any particularly new information, but as a man to 'carry the club' (presumably it was the club used to get people's attention, and teach them.) I can identify with that. He understood that real knowledge was possessed by people who 'touch trees' and that those who simply study them from their ivory towers cannot understand what they do not know first hand. It is these people who are beginning to dominate the field of arboriculture now, applying engineering principles to living trees, not fully cognizant of the biological and educational impacts of their recommendations, IMO.

Already Shigo's work is being referred to as 'old wisdom', as if the branch collar and compartmentalization were passé concepts, not descriptions of true and actual fact. Certainly we will never go back to painting wounds, draining cavities, and flush cutting, But I see a lot of backsliding occurring with regards to respecting the 'dignity of trees'. I fear we will soon be back to drop-crotching, topping, filling, cabling and a lot more over-management to 'save' old trees. And I fear that over-generalization will soon follow: If it's good to drop crotch a really old tree to make it safer, why not a younger tree? If a little is good, why not do more good by pruning lower.

I met Shigo several times, and called him and asked him to review my work (which he did), and I always sent him our newsletter. He even signed a pair of tree sheriff boxer shorts for us last year - which we auctioned off on e-bay. Shigo hugged me once and imparted some personal advice that I remember and cherish. I hear his words often in my head. 'The dose is the thing!' 'The road will kill you!' (I am so glad he died at home.) He told me about the 'nine no's'. As I have asked for funding, or help, or asked the publisher to publish my book (*Cass Turnbull's Guide to Pruning*, Sasquatch Books) and suffered from repeated denials, I always heard his voice. I waited for the final 'yes' that follows the nine 'no's'. He once told me that I had reached a level of influence that I would be subject to criticisms and I should disregard them and just carry on with the work at hand--'like brushing flies aside', was his analogy. He said that if he had one wish it would *not* be to end tree topping, but that all trees would be planted at the correct depth. (One research project by Bartlett showed that 80% are planted 2"-4" too deep) I'll never forget a lecture he gave. He said "I'm going to write a word on this black board that will tell you what you need to do next. And you won't want to see it or do it.' I thought to myself--the word will be 'ethics'. The word was 'chemistry'! I remember being at an ISA conference many, many years ago at some fancy lodge on the coast. I was at the breakfast table with coffee and scones and Dr

Shigo came in and sat down next to Chip and Rob and Jim and Mark and me. It was like being in a dream, asking George Washington to pass the butter. I feel that we should do some special tribute. I haven't seen his obituary in the New York Times, where it should be.

In my own written materials, I have tried to act as a translator of Shigo for the average home gardener. For those unfamiliar with his work I refer you to either chapter on Pruning a Tree Limb in either book.

I hope his passing will spawn a renaissance of the study of his work. I think it is much needed. Long live Shigo!

Cass Turnbull

Founder Plant Amnesty

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