

Saying thank you with flowers - The Bozeman Daily Chronicle: Art

Saying thank you with flowers

By LUANN ROD, Chronicle Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, May 20, 2011 12:15 am

Ikebana isn't just flower arranging, Japanese style.

It's both an art, once practiced by emperor and shogun alike, and a discipline kept by an estimated 15 million Japanese. Regarded on the same level as sculpture or painting, Ikebana uses elements from the natural world to express beauty, emotion and spirituality.

Eiko Arai, an expert instructor in Ikebana who has traveled all over the world teaching the 800-year-old art, comes to the Bozeman Public Library, Saturday, May 21, along with 17 other artists, to share Ikebana and Japanese culture with residents.

Each year, the World Sogetsu Ikebana Instructors Committee chooses a city in which to share its expertise and culture. This year, Bozeman was picked, adding to a list of cities which includes Budapest, Madrid, Miami and Dallas.

"What we're going to be treated to here at the library is world class," said Steve Braun, a Bozeman business owner with strong ties to Japan. Braun, the state's trade office in Japan and the Bozeman Library Foundation worked together to encourage the artists to choose Bozeman.

Ikebana artists, led by Arai, will create displays of flowers to stay on exhibit for about five days and teach workshops in the art. With them will be a master in calligraphy, an 83-year-old master of the Japanese flute and an expert in the traditional tea ceremony.

The trip comes in the wake of the massive disasters currently gripping Japan, and, said Braun, it would have been understandable for the event to have been canceled.

"It would have been so easy for these ladies to say we're dead tired from the panic," said Braun. "Every day they're getting doses of radiation, their grandkids can't drink the water, or if they're drinking it, they're getting radiation. I'm sure they've lost friends and relatives in the tsunami and earthquake. It would have been so easy to say no this year we're not doing it.

"But these ladies are tough, they're brave and they want to share their art with us."

In a telephone interview with Arai from Japan, translated by Braun, the teacher said this is the 43rd year she's been studying and practicing Sogetsu Ikebana, one of several schools of Ikebana styles and philosophy.

Many of the Ikebana practitioners are young women, but Arai said years ago, Ikebana was taught to young children.

"For my generation, we began learning when we were in elementary school. Recently more people begin studying ikebana when they are in their 20s," she said.

But that is changing again.

"We begin teaching our students at age 3. The young children then grow together with the flowers, so it becomes a part of their being, a part of their growing up."

The Sogetsu style teaches that ikebana is an art that should be part of a lifestyle and enjoyed by people all over the world, not only the Japanese. It encourages students to be individual and imaginative and has no limits on plant materials.

Arai said she loves creating large ikebana, "particularly using willow."

A book of her work shows sweeping bamboo installations, intricately braided branches and massive, colorful bouquets. Modern ikebana even uses metal in sculptural displays. Most Japanese households display ikebana on a daily basis, ranging from single blooms to large table-top arrangements.

"Nearly every street corner has a flower shop," said Braun, a frequent visitor to Japan.

But for Arai, ikebana is about more than the beauty.

"The deep part, the deep emotion is what I want to put in ikebana," she said.

Arai has another reason for wanting to continue her teaching outreach.

"After the disasters with the tsunamis, earthquake and the radiation, the Americans have been very, very kind to Japan," she said. "And even though we are only a very, very small part, we want to express our thanks and return, to the people of Bozeman, that kindness."

LuAnn Rod is at getout@dailychronicle.com

WHAT: Ikebana workshop and demonstrations including calligraphy, flute playing and tea ceremony. An ikebana display will be in the Library for about five days.

WHERE: Bozeman Public Library large community room

WHEN: 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday, May 21

WHO IS IT FOR: The public is invited to this free event. To learn how to participate, call 582-2425.