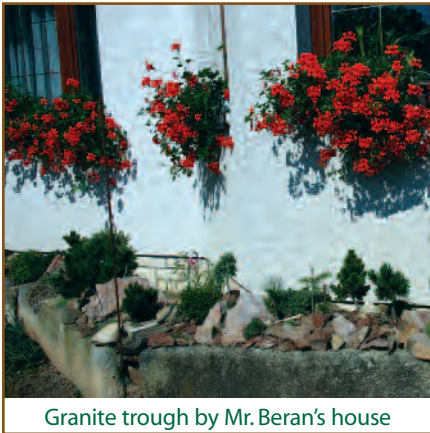


ACS International Trip 2008

Text by Gerald Kral with Photos by Karen Kral

Hills checkered with 500-acre wheat fields and lush woodlands rolling to the horizon. Villages with fairytale houses complete with flowered window boxes and red tile roofs. Ponds and lakes filled with farmed carp. Castles complete with turrets, moats, and gardens. Gothic cathedrals with spires reaching 100 feet. The scenery alone enthralled all 21 of us. And when we visited the conifer gardens, even the most jaded coneheads were awestruck.

Twelve days, 1,600 miles, and thousands of witches'-brooms were convincing evidence that we were in the company of Eastern Europe's "Broom Kings." Our translator, Dr. Jaroslav Kazbal, was a happy, contented man in his 80s, who delighted us with his humor and knowledge of English and plants in general. Peter, our witty tour guide with knowledge of the Czech Republic (CR), made the cultural parts of our tour exciting and interesting.



Granite trough by Mr. Beran's house

Day One

A working iron foundry producing artistic gates, fencing, and sculpture complemented the conifer gardens of Jan Beran. We saw our first of many granite troughs, some as large as 8 feet long, 2 feet wide and deep, with sides 3 to 4 inches thick. They were intricately planted with conifers, alpine flora, and miniature rock-scaping.

Beran has been collecting conifers for 40 years and wants at least one of everything. We had our first *Pinus heldreichii* 'Smidtii' sighting, a 40-year-old specimen approximately 4 feet by 4 feet. We were surprised to see plants from Ed Reznec, Rich Eyre, Larry Stanley, and Bob Fincham. American growers have truly invaded the CR. There was even a *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Chairman' with a good 2-inch caliper. I did not even know the plant existed until five years ago when I lost one after bidding \$300 at an auction.

Beran had a second garden where we saw *Picea uncinata* 'Eva', a very tight, miniature broom named after his wife. A second *P. uncinata* called 'Iseli #5', which was ten years old, was allegedly smuggled into the CR from the United States. Beran did not elaborate. We were all surprised at the health and vigor of the hundreds of specimen brooms. Beran's secret: "Leave the under-stock on for four years or longer." We had a perfect day strolling through Beran's conifer gardens and enjoying his gracious hospitality. We returned to

Prague with the feeling we were in for something truly special on this tour.

Day Two

We spent morning and lunch in the historic center of Tabor with a pleasant, relaxing stroll through cobblestone streets and ancient buildings of this medieval village. After lunch, we left to see the garden of Mr. Krecji. We entered his extensive garden by walking down a quaint country lane. Red, white, and black currants and fruit-laden gooseberries kept us entertained. We encountered our first conifer “brood” tree. To obtain this effect, Krecji used a 12-foot *Abies alba* to nurture at least 25 different witches’-brooms. All the brooms were thriving. Krecji described it as “efficient use of under-stock.”



Two headed *Picea orientalis* 'Tom Thumb' in the Krecji garden

The gardens were beautifully laid out and completely surrounded his house. Notable specimens included several 30-foot *Abies alba* 'Fastigiata', a dozen *Picea orientalis* 'Tom Thumb' on 2-foot standards, and a 25-year-old grove of *Tsuga canadensis* 'Minuta', each approximately 18 inches by 18 inches. His 1-acre production area of brooms, all

different and numbering in the hundreds, was epic. The best plant in the production area was the witches’-broom *Abies alba* 'Kral'. I admit to being biased.

Krecji's grafting skills were phenomenal. I found a little broom grafted onto the base of a mature tree, and he even managed to graft a *Pinus mugo* scion onto *Picea abies* under-stock. He credits that feat to being under the influence of rum, as subsequent sober attempts have all failed. It was also here that we saw our first upside-down graft, *Larix* on *Larix* with the scion reversed. This produced an oddly attractive and congested growth habit. We left a bit sad. We had to wait for Gary Gee and Tom Cox. They were lost in broom heaven. Jaroslav said they were “negotiating.”

Day Three

We spent the morning in the Dendrological Garden of Pruhonice. Duke Silva Tarouca landscaped the gardens in the 19th century. Majestic specimen conifers surrounding a lake and castle are displayed in an alpine manner. It was here that we went on a quest to find the original *Pinus heldreichii* 'Smidtii'. According to Jaroslav, an amateur plant archeologist, the original century-old plant, discovered by Eugene Smidt in 1926, yielded 2,000 scions and then died. Of the 2,000 grafts, only one survived. That survivor was somewhere in the Pruhonice garden. After an hour of hiking around the lake on a 90-degree day, with only a vague idea of its exact location, a 'Smidtii' sighting occurred. It was a tight, dark green pine, only 4 feet by 3 feet and approximately 30 feet up the side of a rock garden cliff. We still were not positive. Elmer Dustman, Richard



Tom Cox with *Pinus Heldreichii* 'Smidtii'

Bomar, and Tom Cox scaled the cliff and pronounced it a legitimate trophy. Bomar took a picture, and Jaroslav later verified our sighting.

From there, we went on to the 35-year-old conifer gardens and collection owned by Mr. Balatka. Joan Sabol echoed the thoughts of all as we entered a garden not more than 40 feet by 100 feet (including the house) as she remarked, "Never again will I complain that you need lots of room to have a spec-

acular garden." Balatka specializes in miniature witches'-brooms. Some *Picea abies* brooms were 20 years old and 6 inches in diameter. One was so tiny (about the size of my thumb) that it was hard to imagine it was real. (Eat your heart out, Larry Stanley!) Dozens of granite troughs were sculpted into works of art using conifer miniatures and sub-alpine plants. *Picea orientalis* 'Tom Thumb' was found growing in tufa!

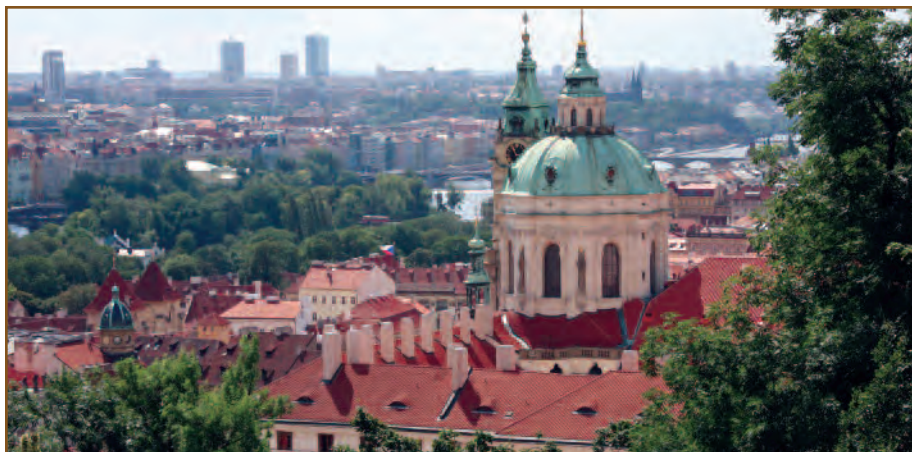
Balatka's "overflow" garden was a small lot next door. Two plants really stood out. One was a *Picea pungens* 'Herman Nave'. It was a perfect mimic of *Picea abies* 'Pusch', being a dwarf *Picea pungens* with terminal cones. The second was a *Picea procera* in full cone. Those of you unaware of this plant in full cone have a treat coming. Evelyn Cox experienced instant rapture (a future CQ issue will feature cones). Karen Kral took a great shot, but Richard Bomar's zoom was bigger, so he got the better picture.

Day Four

No gardens today. This was nice because



Most of our group in the Balatka garden



A view of Prague

we needed time to digest all the coniferous eye-candy of the previous three days. We spent a lovely day touring the City Centre of Prague, with its medieval splendor blending perfectly with pricey shops (such as Tiffany's). Peter kept us well-informed and made sure we hit all the must-see destination spots. We also indulged in some of Prague's evening theater.

Day Five

We traveled to Ledec n. Sasavou to visit the gardens and nursery of Mr. Holata. This garden was more mature, with many miniatures and dwarfs achieving specimen status. At 8 feet, a *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Weissel's Sugaro' was impressive and well named. I need to rethink my opinion of *Thuja occidentalis* 'Golden Tuffet'—at 3 feet by 3 feet, it was nice with outstanding color. Another *Picea abies* 'Kral' was found. A ten-year-old *Picea abies* 'Humulis' was the size of a golf ball (annual growth of 1/8 inch) and was strangely charming perched on an 18-inch standard. A novel way of

growing *Pinus ponderosa* was very well done. At 20 feet, with all side branches removed and 10-inch needles, it looked like a giant pipe cleaner. Although not a conifer, a *Leucothea axillaris* 'Curly Red' was a knockout. We all hope this plant is in the United States.



Chamaecyparis nootkatensis 'Hope' w/b in the Holata garden named for Mr. Holata's wife

The Holata gardens were above a production nursery, and many of the

gardens had this theme. Customers could see what a plant would look like in ten years and then buy a gallon plant a short walk away.

After lunch, we left to tour the medieval city of Kutna Hora. Linda Ayala continued her photos of our dining spots and food plates. Is she writing a book?

Day Six

We traveled to Wohla, Germany, where we visited the gardens and nursery of Jorg Kohout. Three thousand different witches'-brooms were on display! Another 2,000 were in production. Highlight conifers were everywhere. A 12-foot *Taxodium distichum* var. *distichum* 'Pevé Minaret' was the largest specimen most of us had ever seen. A *Pinus contorta* 'Golden Striker' was like a pot of gold at rainbow's end. A 25-foot *Picea omorika* 'Pendula Bruns', 10-foot *Taxus baccata* 'Ivory Tower', and a very yellow *Picea pungens* 'Walnut Glen' only begin to symbolize the conifer treasures in the Kohout garden.



Pinus contorta 'Golden Striker' in Kohout garden

Abies koreana 'Icebreaker' was discovered by Kohout when he tripped walking along a row of *A. koreana* 'Silberlocke' and came face-to-face with the 'Icebreaker' broom hidden in the grass.



Kohout with his 'Icebreaker'

This started a whole series of broom stories. When you see Gary Gee at one of our national or regional meetings, ask him how his miniature *Taxodium distichum* broom got its name. Once again, we had some trouble getting some of our people to leave the gardens.

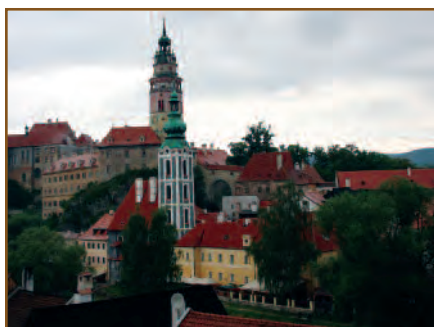
We stayed overnight in Germany, enjoying a great dinner and strolling around. The gardens around the hotel featured several 100-year-old specimens, including some *Taxus baccata* with multiple 18-inch caliper trunks reaching 60 feet.

Day Seven

Next, our travels took us to Ceske Budjovice to visit the gardens and nursery of Mr. Malik. We paid homage to the original *Abies concolor* witches'-broom from which 'Blue Sapphire' originated. Malik's garden was quite mature. Many of the dwarfs and miniatures had come of age. A *Pinus strobus* 'Sea Urchin' was especially nice at 3 feet by 6 feet. Roses randomly peeked out of the conifer foliage, adding startling bursts of bright color. The garden was peaceful and

tranquil. Thousands of grafts were under production. Almost all the grafts were on 18-inch standards. *Picea orientalis* ‘Tom Thumb’ was found in several locations, and all were thriving. A well-grown *Pinus parviflora* ‘Ogon Janome’ was breathtaking. A *Pseudotsuga menziesii* ‘Kral’ was also discovered.

As we sat on the Maliks’ porch enjoying fresh juice and home-baked pastries and surveying the beauty around us, we unanimously agreed we were in conifer heaven.



Ceske Krumlov

Day Eight

In the morning, we visited the city of Cesky Krumlov, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage List. After lunch, we traveled to Austria to visit the garden of Mr. Etzelstorfer. This is a world-class garden with much thought put into combining texture, form, and color.

The conifer vignettes were awe-inspiring. Imagine a 25-foot *Picea orientalis* ‘Skylands’ with a *Taxodium distichum* var. *distichum* ‘Pevé Minaret’ to its left and a *Pinus parviflora* ‘Ogon Janome’ to its right, all fronted by a *Picea pungens* ‘St. Mary’s Broom’ with an orange rose for a highlight. Picture a *Cedrus atlantica* ‘Pendula’ supported with a

stainless steel trellis, forming a 10-foot wall of foliage draped in a curvilinear fashion through dozens of colorful conifers. Imagine the sounds of a brook babbling its way through hundreds of different conifer cultivars and Japanese maples. This garden made me wax poetic.

I found a *Thuja plicata* ‘Golden Pygmy’ that lived up to its name, being bright yellow with an orange overcast. Several *P. omorikas*, *P. abies*, *Thuja plicatas*, and *Pinus strobus* cultivars were thriving under the shade of a sugar maple.

Day Nine

The morning began with a tour of Telc, which is also on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Then, we traveled to the gardens of Miruslav Kostelnicek. What stood out in this private garden and nursery was the use of conifers in unusual and exciting ways. A crabapple tree, loaded with red thumbnail-size fruit, was nestled between two *Thuja filiformis*, a ‘Viridis’ on the left and an ‘Aurea’ on the right. A 10-square-foot area was filled with ground cover of *Juniperus horizontalis* with mounds of the juniper rising 3 feet above the ground cover. At first, I thought



Juniperus horizontalis, cultivar on standard & ground cover in the Kostelnicek garden



Pinus mugo 'Sunshine'

that the mounds had been trained upright from the ground cover. They were actually junipers of the same variety on 3-foot standards. I plan to try this with *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Mother Lode'.

A 4-foot *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Chairman' filled me with envy. After seeing Kostelnicek's *Picea orientalis* 'Tijn', I felt a need to move mine into full sun. 'Tijn' simply glowed, intensely char- treuse with hints of orange. If a *Pinus mugo* 'Sunshine' is not in the United States, many of us will be disappointed.

The plant was still a screaming yellow in August. *Ephedra*, classified as a conifer but rarely featured as a conifer, was well-used and included miniatures along with full-size plants. All were loaded with red juniper-like fruits.

Our stay at the Hotel International Brno was a trip highlight. Modern and filled with natural light, the lobby and dining areas seemed almost ethereal.

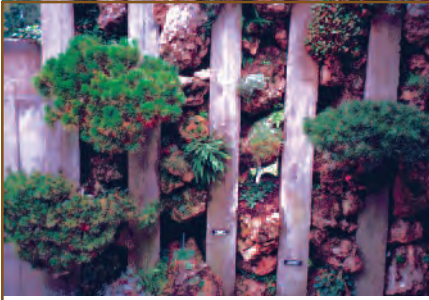
Day Ten

We were given a guided tour of the Brno Arboretum, which is a teaching arboretum for university students taking courses in horticulture. We were treated to the visual impact of a unique rock garden. Twenty-foot sloping troughs were engineered to duplicate the talus slopes that many alpine plants need. Filled with crushed granite to a depth of 12 inches, water constantly trickled from the top of the slope to the bottom. With plant crowns sitting on dry stone and roots able to reach water, the rarest of



Microbiota decussata standards in Kostelnicek garden

alpines thrived.



Vertical tufa garden
in Brno Arboretum

A rock wall approximately 18 inches thick, 10 feet high, and 25 feet long was filled with pieces of tufa. Mugos and other alpine conifers were planted into the vertical walls. Water constantly trickled from the top of the wall to the bottom. This was a vertical alpine garden!

Some of us spotted a huge vine with 8-inch caliper stems disappearing into the tree canopy. It looked like fox grape but not quite. Curious, I walked over and stood in awe as I realized it was a *Hedera helix* that had outlived its support tree. The arboretum was filled with dozens of these unique botanical surprises.

Day Eleven

This was our last day. We toured Prague. Some of us went off on our own to enjoy the sidewalk cafes and shopping ambience of a cosmopolitan city, while others went with Peter, our tour guide, to visit some of his favorite spots. Our last dinner together was especially nice and a bit sad.

We all realized we would miss each other: Jo-Evelyn Morris asking each of us what makes each conifer special; Jim Morris assuming a judicial pose as he admired a conifer vignette; Karen Kral, Kaye Gee, Joyce Dustman, Joan Good-

hart, and Kim Downs always found in a shady nook enjoying the homemade treats provided by our garden hosts; Dennis Lee rating the quality of all the local beers; Frank Goodhart spotting that one special conifer from a mile away; Ellen Kelley proudly awarding each garden host an official ACS hat, while Jim Kelley dutifully photographed the event; and Harry Oefinger who was totally unflappable, whether lost, late, or building his home by long distance cell phone calls. There were many special moments with many special people.

Our garden hosts in the Czech Republic, Austria, and Germany gave us a welcome that we will cherish and remember.

About the author: Gerald Kral is a director of the ACS. He and his wife Karen live and garden in Rochester, New York. Their garden has been featured in numerous magazines and newspapers. Gerald is considered a subject matter expert on gardening, often contacted by the press for horticultural advice.



Prague, St. Vitus Cathedral.