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## TAUNTON & SOMERSET BONSAI CLUB

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Bonsai Newsletter April 2022



Another beautiful tree from Ade's collection.  
A Crab Apple in full bloom.

And so another month has gone by and whilst most of our trees have thrown off the winter duvet and started to leaf out, some such as my Beech, Zelkova and Mulberry are still grimly hanging on to dormancy and before you ask - no they are not dead they are just resting! But I digress, if it's April then it must be time for our club meeting report.

So what do I have to talk about this time? Well, as I mentioned at the end of my March report we had a guest speaker booked, Trevor Banbury from the Staverton Bonsai Group. Trevor arrived, complete with a van load of trees and gave us a thoroughly entertaining talk on his experience in collecting, growing and styling Box as bonsai; as well as the many uses of horse liniment. All will become clear!



A small but select group of members await our guest speaker for the night.

Turns out he had brought a few trees.

As well as Trevor, we welcomed Tony Oswin, also from the Staverton group. Trevor had asked Tony to come along and assist with the talk, demonstrate some wiring techniques for Box trees but mostly to help move the selection of Box bonsai that Trevor had brought with him. First rule of Box club - they are a lot heavier than they look. Also they are a lot older. In bonsai we are used to making trees look older than they actually are but with Box it is the reverse. Box are both slow growing and long lived, so if you judge them against other tree species then they often look much younger than they are. If you are looking at a tree in the ground and trying to estimate its age, have a look at the surroundings. If it's planted in a Victorian garden then it is probably as old as the house and there are examples in 17th century gardens that are still growing strong after 300+ years.



Tony brought along a few of his hand made pots and Trevor had a selection of Box trees in various stages of development for sale.

History lesson over, it's on to the talk. Tony started by explaining how he first became interested in Box trees. When he was 18, Trevor was working in landscaping and one job saw him clearing the land around an old chapel and

there were these three trees with trunks about ten inches across. The landowner told him to dig them out and burn them. Trevor replied that they should save them and try and transplant them but was told that that wouldn't work. Trevor asked his Dad, who was a Forester, to come and have a look. His Dad explained that they were Box trees and judging by the size of the trunks they could be around 300 years old. Trevor dug them up, despite his Dad telling him that they wouldn't live and replanted them. With a lot of watering, the trees survived and Trevor's passion for Box trees was born.

Years later Trevor became interested in bonsai and came across Box trees that were being grown as bonsai. So how was he going to get his hands on suitable starter material? At that time Trevor was working on the bins, refuse collecting all around Wiltshire and whenever he came across a housing development he would ask the builders if he could collect any suitable material. More often than not, that material was mature Box trees, with massive trunks and up to six hundred years old, Trevor and his friends could collect these trees for free and with the right care develop them into specimen trees.



The first Box that Trevor collected and subsequently used to develop his carving skills.

The first Box that Trevor collected, for use as a bonsai, was from a site in Carne and can be seen in the picture above. It was originally a tall tree but at the time Trevor was experimenting with carving and every time he got a new tool, he used it on this trunk, gradually reducing it in size until it was the height you now see. Feeling sorry for the tree Trevor decided to stop carving it and started developing the one remaining branch. Twenty years later it now resembles a

miniature landscape, a tree growing on the remains of an old church or tower.



Trevor has been growing this specimen for 25 years. Originally collected as a stump all the branches have been re-grown. The tree is allowed to push new growth until the autumn when it is then restyled.

So how do you develop Box trees as bonsai? Well the first thing to remember is that they do not like full

sun. Autumn sun is OK and light shade is preferable but don't leave them exposed to full sun. The leaves will turn yellow, then brown and eventually they will die. However if you are quick and you get them back in the shade, they can be rescued. The bark on Box is very thin and you have to be careful when working with them, not to damage it. But one way to revive or encourage new growth is to lightly scrub the trunk with lots of water. Trevor discovered this when he cleaned up a "dead" tree that he was going to

give to his brother for wood turning. This tree had been left in full sun and had suffered accordingly. Trevor moved it out of the sun and cleaned up the trunk ready for collection. However when his brother eventually came around to collect it, Trevor found that it had produced lots of shoots from the adventitious buds on the trunks and the tree is still alive today and looking good. Another point about Box is their ability to enter a form of dormancy. Like Olive trees, Box will sometimes sit for long periods without producing any new growth but give them a scrub and you will kick start them into producing new growth.

Another way of encouraging growth is to refresh the growing medium. Take them out of their pots, untangle the root but do not trim the roots unless it is your usual repotting time. Then give them fresh growing medium and plenty of Naruko (Chicken pellets) fertiliser. This will re-energise the tree and should produce new growth. Trees are fertilised according to their state of development. Trees in development are fertilised monthly whilst older or established trees are fertilised every couple of months.

There are around 65 different species of Box spread around the world with 3 commonly found in Europe, the most common of these being *Buxus sempervirens* or the common Box. There are also a few cultivars that can be found in nurseries but the general consensus is that they do not do well as bonsai. Within *Buxus sempervirens* you find differences in the bark. Some have a very smooth bark whilst others develop a very rough, rugged bark. They also lend themselves to incorporating dead wood and carving and the combination of aged dead wood and rugged bark is a hard one to beat.

Another way of producing material for bonsai is to air layer from existing trees. Box will air layer very well and selecting a suitable branch can produce a nice characterful tree in a much shorter time. You can also collect sections of a trunk that has rotted out as long as the base has some fine root and you provide the right care, they will survive and furnish you with an interesting piece of material to work on. The main thing is to keep watering them and also not to forget the canopy. Trevor explained that he has not had any problems with Box flies as he always gives the leaves a good soaking when watering and that seems to prevent any bugs taking up residence. This is probably a good tip for all our trees. Talking of rotting trunks and dead wood, how does Trevor maintain the dead wood on his Box trees? Horse liniment! Trevor scrubs the dead wood with a tooth brush and horse liniment and that seems to do the trick. If the wood is very soft then Trevor admitted that he will use wood hardener to stabilise it but if it is OK then just the liniment will do. Horse liniment can also be used to drive off pest such as white fly. Some tape soaked in liniment is tied around the trunk and off the pests fly or crawl. Whilst we are on an equine track Tony, busy doing the wiring, commented that he now uses horse bandages instead of raffia when bending branches as they are easier to apply and retain moisture better than raffia.

Other than regular watering, Trevor's Box tree maintenance consists of removing any yellow leaves when they appear, pinching out any unwanted growth during the growing season and removing the flowers as soon as they appear. Repotting can be done every year, to promote growth, or if you want the tree to retain its current shape then you can leave it in its pot for 5 or 6 years without any problems. When starting with a collected or layered tree, Trevor uses a peaty based soil as a potting medium then moving to pure Akadama for established trees.



Trevor calls this one "Grandma" and I think we can all see why!

Trevor found "Grandma" whilst out collecting and in his words "she needed help". "She" didn't have much in the way of branches but looking at the girth of the trunk you can see that this is a very old tree. The trunk is around 18 inches across and the back of the tree is completely hollow. Trevor dug her up, brought her home and by following his tried and tested routine he has developed a fine head of branches. In the next few years Trevor will start to

select the branches and then develop the foliage pads. But at the present he is just happy with her as she is.



Trevor explained that he is very cautious when it comes to wiring Box as their thin bark and delicate branches can result in the loss of wired branches. Trevor prefers to use the cut and grow method, however if you are very careful and ensure that the wire is not left on for more than 3 months, you can wire Box. In the picture below you can see a Twin trunk tree that Tony wired during the talk. Note the black horse bandage being used underneath the wire to protect the bark.

Richard admires Tony's wiring skills on the "Rats nest Box tree"!

This tree was collected from the top of a rat's nest and was simply lifted out of the ground, no digging required. Another thing to look for when growing Box as bonsai is

wood rot. If a tree that has been growing well suddenly starts to die back have a look at the trunk for signs of rot. If you do find any then clean it back to sound wood and the tree should recover its health.

One of the drawbacks of growing Box trees is their occasional smell. If you have never smelt a box tree when it is in full fragrance, then you haven't lived. The closest smell would be a cat's litter tray that had not been cleaned for quite a while. Not pleasant! However not all Box trees develop this pungent aroma but if yours does, you can always blame next door's cat.

Having discussed all of the trees that he had brought along, Trevor filled the rest of the evening with anecdotes about his life, bonsai and the importance of trees. In fact, far too many stories to recount here. So if you want to hear about collecting trees from Pagan dance circles, or even more uses for horse liniment then you will have to book Trevor for one of your meetings or come along to ours next time we have him over. You won't regret it.



Geoff brought along this old, collected Larch to provide some much needed background colour.

### Tree of the month

The theme was "Spring tree" or "bring your favourite Larch to the meeting"!



My Cascade Larch accompanied by Tony's delightful shohin Larch



Richard M's shohin Larch



Richard P's shohin Larch



Michael's Kashima Japanese maple



Dave's Crab apple



And the winner of the member's vote was - Me, with Richard P and Michael as runners up.

Next month our meeting is all about "Taking your trees to the next level". Hints and tips on how to present your trees, when displaying them at meetings or shows. Shows such as our summer show at Willowbrook Garden Centre on the 28th & 29th May. Put the date in your diary and pop in to see our trees and meet the members in person. There is a lovely little cafe on site so you could stay for lunch or maybe a cream tea. It would be rude not to.

And with that plug I will leave you all with one final thought from Trevor.

"These trees are like antiques. They can live hundreds of years and we are just looking after them for future generations, so they can appreciate and enjoy them like we have".

Till the next time, stay safe and "keep doing bonsai".  
Alistair