



TAUNTON & SOMERSET BONSAI CLUB

Bonsai Newsletter January 2022



Ade's Kiyohime Japanese Maple

Welcome to the first club meeting of 2022. The topic for this meeting was Spruce trees and our President and resident bonsai professional, John Trott, gave us a very interesting and informative talk on using this genus as bonsai and dispelled a few common myths along the way.



Guest speaking 2022 style!

Myth number 1 - "It's often said that Spruce trees, are difficult to grow as bonsai"

John explained that rather than being a difficult tree, it is more a matter of choosing the right tree i.e. the right species of Spruce. Currently there are 35 species of spruce recognised by plant aficionados and 59 different names used for those species, which could lead to some confusion! Some of these species are slow growing, some are dwarf varieties and others are fast growing. But which are best for bonsai?

John lists the following ones as being suitable for bonsai cultivation:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Picea glauca var. albertiana 'Conica' | Dwarf Alberta white spruce. |
| Picea pungens | Dwarf Colorado spruce. |
| Picea Abies "Little gem" | good species for mame size bonsai. |
| Picea Mariana | Black spruce |
| Picea jezoensis - | Ezo spruce |
| Picea jezoensis micro spora | a subspecies of the Ezo spruce. |
| Picea Orientalis | Oriental or Caucasian spruce. |
| Picea Glenei | Red Ezo spruce |
| Picea Abies Koreans "Silver tiger" | Korean Fir |
| Picea Engelmannii | commonly known as the Engelmann spruce |
| White spruce | Mountain spruce or Silver spruce |



Set up the chairs and they will come.



And here they are!

Myth number 2 - Spruce trees don't back bud!

Wrong, they will back bud. In fact if you prune correctly they will produce a wealth of buds but you have to time it right. Spruce have "Epicormic buds" on their trunks and branches. These buds are laid down during the juvenile stages of growth then lie dormant beneath the bark, their growth suppressed by hormones from active shoots higher up the plant. Under certain conditions, they will develop into active shoots, such as when damage occurs to higher parts of the plant, or light levels are increased following removal of nearby plants. So how do we take advantage of these dormant buds? Spring pruning will remove the hormones that are keeping these buds dormant and will encourage them to flush out the following year. Then it is a simple matter of rubbing off those buds that you don't want and leaving the ones you do. Allow them to grow then repeat as required. You can also nip back new growth by pinching out the growing tips on shoots which will also activate these dormant buds. One note of caution, as Spruce trees are apical dominant, they are susceptible to losing side branches. Take care to distribute the trees energy towards the lower growth when pruning.



John Admires his "Multiple trunk" Ezo Spruce, now in its fifth decade of cultivation.

Myth number 3 - Spruce takes a long time to develop aged bark!

Well, yes they do, but there are some short cuts you can take. Wiring the trunks and then allowing the wire to bite in, will produce a more rugged appearance. If you are planning on using any branches for Jin then wiring them and then allowing the wire to bite deeply, will produce very realistic looking dead wood once you have stripped off the bark. This can also be used very successfully on pines.



John shows a dwarf Spruce on which he has allowed the wire to bite into the trunk resulting in the formation of rugged bark.

Another problem with Spruce is the propensity for their trunks to split into two well above the base of the trunk. Can they still be called twin trunks or are they twin branches? Well does it really matter? They do it in their natural habitat so maybe we should just accept their behaviour and make the best of it. To do this, consider how you use perspective when choosing the front of the tree. Looking straight on at the "catapult" like Y, will never be very attractive but rotate the tree a few degrees and you suddenly loose the Y and gain a back branch. Is it a twin trunk or is it an informal upright? You decide. What I do know is that it is a Picea Abies 'Fahndrich' grown since 1996 and still less than 8 inches high.



Like all conifers, Spruce lend themselves to the "Literati" style, as long as it is done correctly! Thin, elegant trunks with minimal foliage and gentle movement in their branches, look good and generally the more you remove the better, they look.



Here we have a classic "twin trunk" Spruce. Could this be used to make a literati style tree?

Remove one of the trunks, wire the other one and put some gentle movement into it. Select some suitable branches, wire them and remove the rest.

And here we have it - the start of a literati Spruce.



Myth numbers 4 - Spruce are prone to growing moss on their trunks and branches.

Sadly this one is true. They do have a nasty habit of growing moss on their branches, where the tightly bunched needles make it very difficult to remove. The only recourse is to get the tweezers out and get plucking. Leaving the moss will eventually lead to the bark becoming too wet and may result in rotting and eventual loss of the branch.



You need to get right in there with your tweezers and make sure you have a strong light source so you can see what you are doing.

Myth number 5 - Spruce does not grow well in a garden environment!

It's true that Spruce do not like hot temperatures. Their natural environment is the Northern climes and high elevations, with a preference for temperatures in the range of -3 to 18°C and high humidity, growing them in your average garden requires some planning. John explained that he positions his Spruces so that they get sun for half the day and plenty of water. They do not require frost protection and will grow happily in a normal "soil" mix, as long as it has good water retention. Feed regularly with a standard well balanced "feed" such as Naruko slow release fertiliser. Repot Spruce as you would Pines - end of March to early April.

John's final tree was probably what most people would consider to be a classic looking Spruce.

Tall, slim, tapering trunk with drooping branches all spiralling around the trunk.

As well as wiring some of these branches, John has used guy wires to pull down the ends of the branches. When styling Spruce it is important to ensure that branches do not form an inverse J. They should point straight down from the trunk, in the classic Christmas tree style, rather than come out and then down.

The trunk should also be straight all the way to the apex. So this tree is going to be attached to an iron metal bar, using cable ties. This means that the trunk can be slowly straightened, over a period of time, without the need to remove wire and then rewire.



We look forward to seeing this tree in a few years' time, looking as though it has spent its entire life on the side of a mountain.



[This Month sees the start of the 2022 "Tree of the month competition"](#)

[Novice Category](#)



Novice winner - Nigel's Hawthorne (There was only one entry but it was a nice one)

Advanced category



Richard P's Larch



Richard M's Scots pine



Mike's Birch



Advanced winner - Alistair's Chinese Cork Bark Elm

So there we have it. The start of a new year, a club meeting just like the old days and the promise of more to come. Just make sure you are at the next one - 9th February for our club auction and 9th March for a repotting workshop.

See you.

Alistair