



TAUNTON & SOMERSET BONSAI CLUB

Bonsai Newsletter November 2022



Ade's yamadori Scots Pine

"Bonsai, the art of taking a simple plant or tree and turning it into a reminder of nature's beauty within a confined space". Anon

But the big question is - what do we use for that "confined space"? The answer is obvious. Usually any receptacle that will hold the bonsai and keep it healthy! But is there more to it than that?

Well, we spent a whole evening discussing what makes a suitable container and more importantly what doesn't and we only scratched the surface. You will often hear the humble bonsai container (I use the word container as it may not actually be a pot but more on that later) likened to a picture frame. There are thousands of types of picture frames and a limitless supply of art to go in them. But just because one fits the other, it doesn't mean that it looks right. Would you put a copy of the Mona Lisa in a clip frame? You could, but putting the original in one, would be sacrilege. So where do you start?

Ade had a few pointers to start the discussion. A list of guidelines if you like, that have survived the test of time:

Basic “rules of thumb”

- Pot should be 2/3 height or width of tree, whichever is greatest
- Pot depth should approx. equal width of trunk just above nebari
- Unglazed “earth” colours for evergreens
- Subtle glazes for deciduous
- Bright colours for flowering
- The pot must be large enough for the tree to thrive

These basic rules will serve you well, but there are exceptions and you should not follow them slavishly!

- Some trees need deeper pots e.g. azaleas, crab apples and many other flowering trees. They may struggle in shallow pots
- Cascades will need tall, deep pots
- Crescent pots are good for semi-cascades
- Groups/clump style generally look best in relatively shallow pots
- A shallower pot tends to give a “landscape” impression

Colour

Think about when your tree looks best – or when you want to display it. You might want to match spring or autumn colours, for example. Try to make a subtle match to leaf colour, bark etc.

For flowering trees a bright contrasting colour may look good and will show off the flowers or fruit.

Style

Powerful masculine trees look best in chunky angular pots. Ovals and rounded edges suit elegant feminine trees best. Take care with round pots, they are best used for

(a) trees where the apex lies at/beyond the pot edge - this will appear to anchor the tree

(b) elegant/tall/literati.

Abstract pots suit dramatic trees.

Many trees, neither powerful nor elegant, fall in between.

- Raised feet make a pot look more elegant
- Curves soften a pot
- A line or part glaze will make a pot appear shallower than it is
- A lip or rim also softens/lightens

Use these tricks to achieve the look that you want.

Hopefully that all makes sense and you can now start to visualise your trainee bonsai in their final pots. Ade did make the point that all experienced bonsai growers had at some time or other bought pots without having a particular tree in mind for it. We have all done it and what we then end up with, is a large collection of pots and trees still needing the right pot. Buy a pot for a specific tree, based on the above guidelines and you won't go far wrong. Usually there will be a few suitable choices for a given tree but there will be many more that don't work and take away from the overall image that you are trying to create.

We also need to remember that these are living things and that they need certain conditions in order to grow and contra to popular myth, we do want them to grow as that allows us to develop them. So trees in development may not be ready for their final pot, in fact they may be years away from it, so don't go buying one yet!

Trees that are being restyled, nursed back to health or just having a rest may be placed in larger containers and allowed to benefit from the extra space until it is time to show them off again. If you have a look at any YouTube video of professional bonsai nurseries, you will see high quality trees in large wooden boxes. They are having a rest and as they are not being exhibited, they do not need to be in their "Sunday best" pot.

It has often been said that we are too eager to get our trees into their "final" pots and that we should take more time to develop the tree before making pot choices. This brought us onto the thorny issue of "round" pots. Ade admitted that he is not a fan of round pots, but others like them. Personally I tend to put a tree in a round pot if I haven't decided on the front, or if it has not received its initial styling yet. That way I can rotate the tree and not be distracted by any corners or angular edges. Once you have done the first styling you can then choose a suitable shape, albeit a larger deeper version and transfer it at the next repotting.



Ade's twin trunk Berburis

Ade's tree above is planted in a glazed oval pot made by Chris Jefferies of Spectre Ceramics. Ade explained that he chose this pot for several reasons. Firstly the size and shape complement the style and size of the tree. The glaze works well with both the colour of the bark and the leaves.



(If in doubt about what colours work together then Google "Colour Wheel" and choose colours that face each other on the wheel). Blue/green complements orange/red, so this pot works well with the purple/red/orange colour of the leaves in all seasons. Also if you look at the glaze you will notice that it finishes 3/4 of the way down, leaving a line around the pot. This makes the pot appear shallower than it actually is, thus allowing the tree a bit more space for its roots. See guideline above.

As well as the Berburis, Ade had brought along two other trees to help explain pot choice. The first was a Scots Pine, see first image in this report, that had been collected in Spain. Following his own advice, Ade had the unglazed rectangular pot made for the tree by Graham Simpson of Dragonfly Bonsai Pots. The texture of the pot complements the rough bark and suits the naturalistic look of the tree.

The second tree was a small Hawthorn planted in another Dragonfly pot. The pot and tree were purchased separately but on the same day. The tree first, then the pot to match the tree. The tree is a semi cascade style so Ade chose a crescent pot and the craggy surface of the pot complements the rough angular look of the trunk.



Next up was John C's Chinese Elm in a blue octagonal pot. This was a good example of how we make exceptions when training trees. The tree was made from a cutting, several years ago, and is still in the early stages of design. If we go by the guidelines then the pot is way too big for the trunk size and not the right style. However as our President, John Trott, commented, "Leave it in the pot and continue to grow it as a cascade style tree and it will eventually suit the pot"!

When a crescent pot is correct



Small tree, big pot - grow tree bigger!

The next tree was a Metasequoia or dawn redwood, purchased by Zac, in a deep, round pot. Well as usual the pot looks too deep for the tree and it would create a better image if it was in a shallower rectangle however as John T explained, Metasequoia prefer a deeper pot and if you try to grow them in a shallow pot you will need to replot every year. It was agreed that the colour would suit the tree in the summer, so for now it will stay in that pot.



Zac's Metasequoia in its round pot

Ade then decided to ask the audience for their thoughts on the Tree Of The Month entries and the choices of pot. This produced a lot of lively debate, and the "Judges" thoughts can be found in the [Critique Section](#).



Next up was Tony's crescent style pot and a collected Blackthorn in a pond basket. The question was "does the pot suit the tree"?

Perhaps a crescent pot is not quite right.

Initially Ade thought that the pot was too small for the tree however on closer inspection, it looked like it would fit, however the biggest problem was the tree's long straight trunk. Tony wanted to

plant the tree more upright, which Ade felt would negate the need for a crescent pot. Would it look better in a shallow rectangle to give a "Windswept moor" look or can it be put in a crescent pot. More debate ensued and it was even suggested that the tree could be redesigned as a "Literati" style tree, if one of the heavy branches was removed and the tree planted upright in a chunky drum pot.



Tony's collected Blackthorn, is it a semi cascade or literati?

Tree of the Month Competition - Evergreen Tree

In the Advanced Class there were 4 entries:



Geoff's Yew



Richard M's Pine



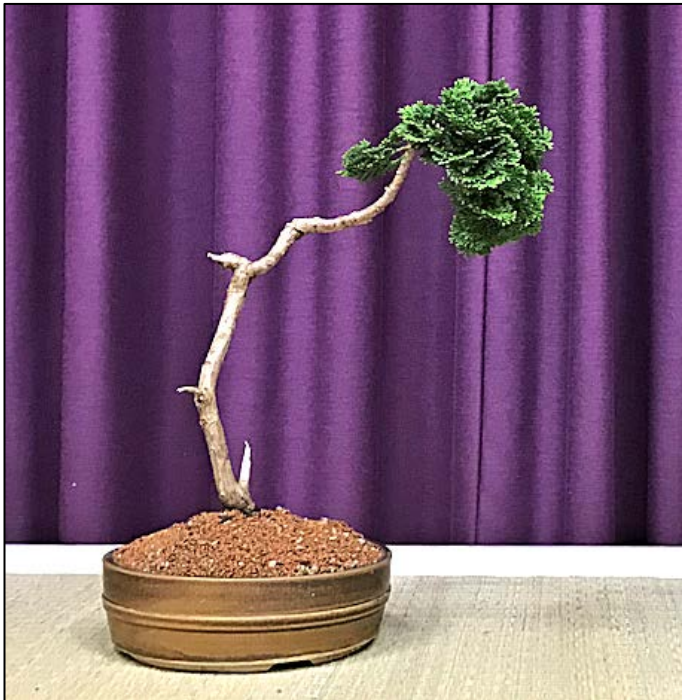
Alistair's Yew



Michael's Mugo Pine

And the people's choice in the Advanced Class was - Geoff's Yew.

In the Novice Class there were 2 entries:



Nigel's Hinoki Cypress



John's Azalea

And the people's choice for the Novice class was - Nigel's Hinoki.

If you would like to see what the judge's thoughts were, not just on pot selection, then click here for the [Critique Section](#).

[Q and A Session with Ade and John](#)

Ade and John ponder the question of where to get your pots from and what are glazes?

But before that, Chris asked the panel what trees they would recommend for people starting out in Bonsai?

John explained that when he does his workshops, he has a handout that lists trees he has grown in the past and splits them into "Yes" trees and "Don't waste your time" trees. Like most bonsai growers, John has tried to grow many different species for bonsai and found that there are a lot that do not work, for various reasons. So concentrate on those trees that will help you along in your journey. For example:



Cotoneaster: available in most garden centres. Easy to grow as a small to medium bonsai, in almost all styles and you get the bonus of having flowers and berries.

Hornbeam:
Beech:
Larch: in all its different species
Escallonia
Maples
Scots Pines: are good for beginners as they are very forgiving
Junipers: are also good but harder to get hold of now. If you do find any prostrate Junipers in a garden centre, then try tipping the tree 90° and see the difference, after all many of those amazing Yamadori trees you see in shows were growing horizontally before they were collected.



If you had a tree this big it would fit in this pot.

John then went on to talk about glazes and the potters that use them. In the last few years there has been a wave of new potters producing bonsai pots in the UK. A lot of the old school of bonsai potters are now reaching retirement age and there are more local potters who are selling their pots on platforms such as Etsy and eBay e.g. Funky Fish Ceramics.

The Japanese and Chinese potters tend to make large numbers of the same style pot in order to be financially viable. The Chinese particularly, have fallen behind by not producing new glazes and styles, whilst the Western potters operate on a smaller scale and work in a market where virtually every pot they make is unique in some way. However, the Chinese are not ones to miss an opportunity, and they are now starting to produce oxide

finishes on pots such as the two large round pots in the picture above. The green pot that John is holding is also a Chinese pot and is representative of a new style of finish which has an oxide finish on the top and bottom and a matt finish in between. Looks nice and would suit many different trees, Maples, Crab Apples and any flowering species.

Another thing to bear in mind is that bonsai pots are not getting any cheaper, firing a kiln is now costing 3 times as much as it did a couple of years ago and the cost of clay and glazes are also rising fast.

So John's advice - if you see a pot you like then buy it because when you eventually need that pot for a tree, it will be more expensive. Quality bonsai pots also make a good investment for your retirement fund, if you can bear to sell them!

Ade commented that large bonsai shows, such as the Swindon show, are a good source of pots and it is a good idea to look around your collection, decide which trees need a new pot, what style and size you need, then go with your list and purchase them. However you may need to get there early, as there is always a lot of competition amongst pot buyers. John explained that at the Bonsai Live Show in Telford, earlier this month, potter Gordon Duffett sold all his pots within a couple of hours of the show opening. So you have to be quick if you want quality!

A used (vintage) white crackle glaze pot with some interesting embossed designs, a bargain at £10.

Sadly time caught up with us. So we had to finish the discussions and we hadn't even mentioned slabs, natural rocks or "alternative" planting containers. Maybe next time.

Well that is it for this month. Our next meeting is on Wednesday 14th December and we will be having our Annual General Meeting and "bring & share supper".

There will not be a "Tree of the Month competition" but people are welcome to bring along a tree for decoration, after all we are a bonsai club!

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



Alistair