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## SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

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Bonsai Newsletter April 2023



Ade's lovely twin trunk Berberis, full of flowers.

Welcome to the April meeting report. This month we had a workshop, concentrating on "problem trees". Members were encouraged to bring along those trees that needed that extra bit of help, John and Ade were on hand to provide advice, guidance and the odd bit of encouragement to "just cut that off"!



Our chairman getting all the Society business out of the way, before we start.

Like other forms of horticulture and art, bonsai can be a bit of a solitary undertaking so it is always good to take the opportunity to work on your trees alongside someone else. Particularly if they are as enthusiastic as yourself and there was a lot of enthusiasm in the room.

Before we got down to pruning and wiring, our chairman, Ade reminded us about the advent of the Bonsai show season. If you live in the South West then there are several opportunities coming up, to see quality bonsai in a show setting and our society is pleased to be showing trees at them all. If you are interested in coming along to one or more of them then have a look at our website [Somerset Bonsai Society](#) for more details.

Once Ade was finished we all got down to business. Just like school, eager hands went up and some people asked for help whilst others knew what they had to do and got on with it.

I got on with the business of documenting the meeting, after I had explained to Pam (my trusty apprentice) what needed doing to my "problem" Mulberry tree. More on that later.



**Bob contemplates his Juniper before tackling the Maple.**

Bob had brought along a couple of trees to work on. A nice little Needle Juniper that he had wired and just required a bit of a tidy up and a Shishigashira Japanese Maple that was proving difficult to deal with.

Bob had two of these Maples that had been grown from "cuttings" left over from a demonstration at the Bristol Bonsai Society many years ago. One tree was thriving and had produced plenty of bushy growth whilst this one had not. Although it had developed a nice trunk and roots, it had also lost a strip of bark on the front which subsequently developed into an interesting shari. However, this shari had also led to the loss of several branches. This variety of Japanese Maple can be very reluctant to back bud and this was definitely the case with this one. To overcome this, Bob had made several "thread" grafts but only one of them had taken. You can see the result in the image above – the large branch on the left is a graft from the foliage at the top of the tree. Bob was now at a loss on how to proceed as he had run out of suitable branches to graft and wasn't sure if the tree would tolerate any more.

My suggestion was to use his other tree, which is from the same donor tree and take cuttings from it over the coming months. Next year, these cuttings can be used as "approach" grafts onto the trunk. I suggested that he does more than required, as a 50% success rate would be very good and he should probably expect less than that. I look forward to seeing how Bob succeeds with this project as it is an interesting trunk and deserves to live on as a bonsai.



**Tony M working on his collected Spruce.**

Next to Bob, we had Tony, John and Richard. All busy working away on their trees. No help needed here, as they all knew what they needed to do.

Tony had brought along a couple of collected trees. A Yew, which you can see on the left and a very nice Spruce. The Spruce had been collected on one of our Pre-Lockdown collecting trips and was now looking very good. Tony explained that a lot of the Spruce he had collected had not survived, however this one had and was doing well. It had a nice trunk shape, good taper and was starting to develop the required branch ramification. I expressed my envy as none of the ones that I collected on the same trip had survived, despite being "mollycoddled". I guess that is one of the drawbacks to collecting trees from dense woodland. The ones we are allowed to take are often struggling beneath the taller trees and sometime cannot make the transition. But at least we try and sometimes succeed.

John was working on a Pine and a Larch. Busy wiring and pruning and waiting for the result of the Tree of the Month competition, where he was the only entry in the Novice category. A sure win!



**Richard's Yew and Field Maple.**

Next to John was Richard, who had brought along a couple of his shohin bonsai. A collected Field Maple and a Yew. Neither of them were "problem trees", they just needed a bit of time spent on them to deal with last year's growth and a bit of a tidy up after the long winter. Richard did ask what I thought about the Yew's apex as he was contemplating letting the main trunk develop a bit more to form a more "classic" apex. I said that I liked it as it was, as it reminded me of those Pines that you see up on the moors. Where the apex is continually killed off by the wind and you end up with a flat-topped tree. It just needs a bit of wiring to differentiate the branches.



**Dave working on his Japanese Cedar.**

Moving along, we have Dave who had brought his Japanese Cedar (*Cryptomeria Japonica*). Dave had purchased this tree from an old collection and as often happens in these cases the tree had been allowed to grow freely. The tree is quite old and the trunk is showing a lot of "maturity", however the branches need to be cut back severely. Dave asked our resident professional John Trott for advice and John kindly worked on the first branch explaining what needed to go and what could stay. Dave then carried on the good work removing at least 50% of the foliage on each branch and opening up the tree to allow light and air into it. *Cryptomeria* tend to back bud willingly so Dave should see some quick results. Then it will be a case of regularly pinching the new growth to develop dense foliage pads.

Next to Dave we had "old bonsai hand" Michael, who was helping Chris with his newly acquired Larch.



One of Tony W's smaller trees.

It was good to see Tony, who had brought one of his "smaller" trees. A kifu size Japanese Maple. Once again, no help required just time to prune a few of those extended shoots and then a quick tidy up. "Can someone help me carry this to the car"? You could hear a pin drop!

Paul and Nigel discussing "The joy of Junipers"!

Nigel does like a large Juniper and tonight he had two. Both had been "rescued" from the garden (although I don't think his wife sees it that way) and needed some wiring to bring the foliage pads back under control. Unlike Tony, Nigel had brought a trolley so he didn't need any help taking both trees back to his car. Forward thinking!



Cathy, Paul and "son in law" hard at work.

A few meetings back, Michael had suggested that members should try to bring along a neighbour/friend/ relative to a meeting in an effort to boost our membership. Well Cathy and Paul succeeded in persuading their son-in-law to attend and all three of them got down to some serious bonsai work. I wonder if he has been "bitten by the bug" or will he escape and take up a less "garden space consuming" hobby? Time will tell.



**Simon getting professional help  
from our President John**

I had finally caught up with John T who was helping Simon with his Chinese Juniper.

Following on from his excellent talk on "Literati" bonsai, John advised Simon to remove a couple of the lower branches (there are actually three branches on the lower left of the tree) and style the tree as a – you guessed it – literati bonsai. I can't wait to see how it develops.

And finally, we are back where we started. Pam had followed my instructions and after weeding the surface, 90% of bonsai work is weeding, she started on pruning all the dead wood and cutting back the live shoots to two buds. This is the only tree in our collection that I would consider to be a "problem tree". It basically pleases itself when and for how long it will break into leaf. Although the buds are nice and plump at the moment, it has not produced a single leaf and in the past couple of years it has dropped its leaves anytime between the end of July and October. So, I basically feed it, water it and prune the long shoots and wait to see what happens. I am styling it in the "fairy tale tree" style made popular by Walter Pall (Google it if you would like to know more, maybe even try it for yourself) and hope to do some carving on the trunk in the Autumn.



**Pam trying to hide behind a Mulberry.**

On the right of the picture is Pam's Spindle tree that was bought at last year's society auction. It has a great nebari and is responding well to pruning. Next spring, we will replot it into a more suitable container, possibly a reddish/brown glazed oval.

Time now for a break, some refreshments and the Tree of the Month competition. This month saw a record number of entries and a lot of work for our resident judge, Ade.



Tree of the Month competition



Chris' Larch



John's Hawthorne



My Larch.



Nigel's Larch



Richard P's Larch



Richard P's Downy Birch

Tony M's Crab  
Apple



In the Advanced section Tony's lovely Crab apple won with 7 votes.

If you would like to read the judges' comments then click [here](#)



Tony W's Hawthorne



The winner of the novice section would have been John except Chris decided to move his tree from the Advanced section to the Novice; he had put it in the Advanced by mistake. A sound decision as he won 7 votes to 6.

Tony's Japanese Maple after its prune and tidy up.



Ade's lovely Amelanchier in flower.

Back to the trees. Well, what else can I say? Members carried on with their work, pruning, weeding and wiring and time ticked away. I always get a good feeling from these evenings. There is something special about working on your trees in the company of like-minded individuals and I always wish that they lasted a bit longer but sadly time always runs out and we have to have one last look around at what others have achieved and then pack up and go home. But there is always next month to look forward to.

So, what are we doing next month I hear you ask? Well, we are discussing; 'Taking your trees to the next level - what can you do to make your bonsai stand out?'

Simple tips and techniques to prepare trees for a show, as we will be holding our annual summer show at Willowbrook Garden Centre, see our website for more info and the Tree of the Month will be Spring Colour.

Until then, stay safe, keep doing bonsai and get out and visit a few bonsai shows – maybe I will see you there.

Alistair