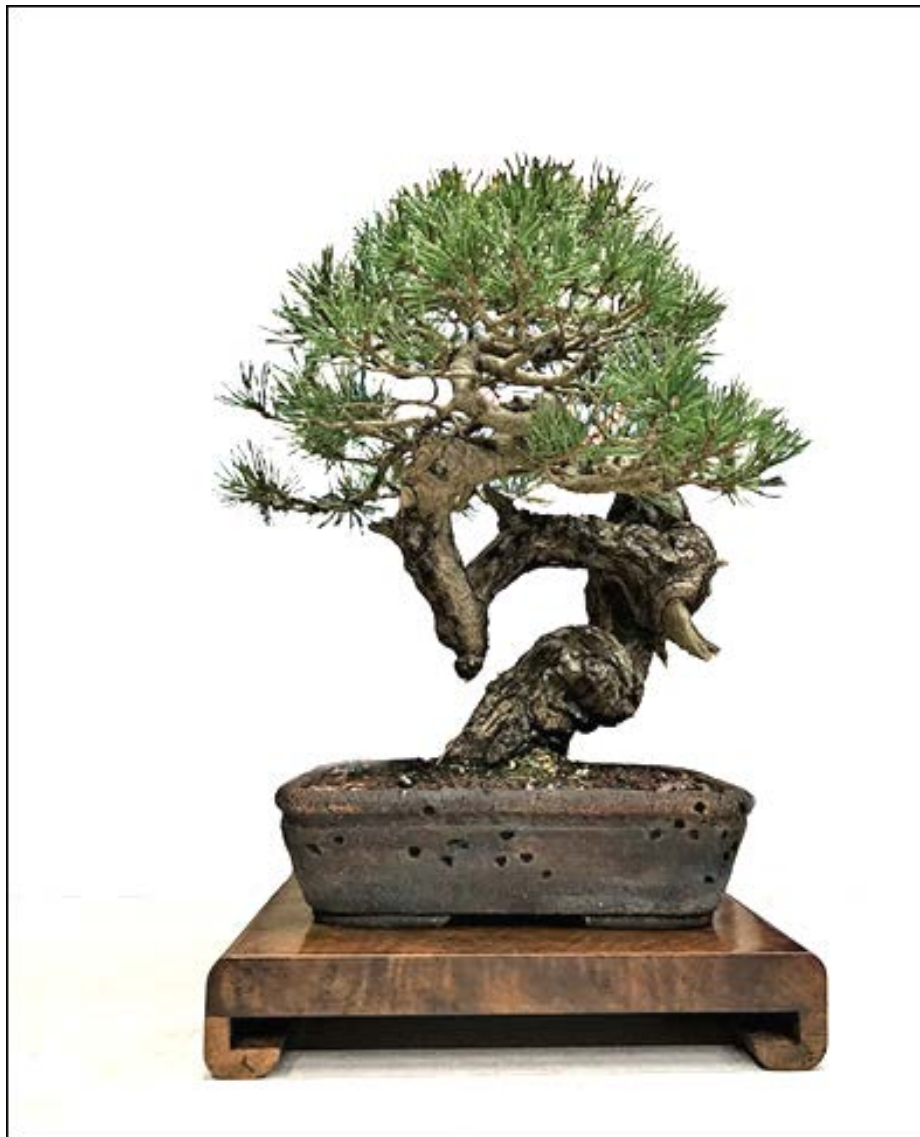




SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

Bonsai Newsletter August 2023



Ade's Scots Pine – no need for a critique here as it ticks all the boxes.

Welcome to the August meeting report. This month we had a guest speaker, Caroline 'Caz' Scott who gave us a very interesting and informative talk on styling Pines and Junipers, as well as critiquing a few of our members' trees. Caz has been involved in bonsai for over 30 years and is recognised, both nationally and internationally, as a speaker and demonstrator specialising in Pines and Junipers. So, without further ado let's hear what Caz thinks about our members' trees.



First up was Michael's lovely little Mugo Pine. If you are familiar with Michael's Bonsai blog, then you will have seen this tree. Michael has been growing it for almost four decades and is very fond of it, but he is always interested in getting other people's thoughts on it. Caz started by explaining that her critique would be based on what she would do with the material but that the owner had to live with the tree, so if they liked it the way it was then that was fine.



Caz complimented Michael on the density of the Pine's foliage and the general health of the tree however, with its flat top, it reminded her of an Acacia tree rather than a pine tree. Bonsai look more aesthetically pleasing if they are made up of asymmetrical triangles. The overall outline resembling an asymmetrical triangle and then the foliage pads are made up of smaller asymmetrical triangles.

The negative spaces within the tree should also correspond to the asymmetrical rule. The apex and foliage pads should have rounded tops to give a more mature look rather than the sharp points seen on younger trees. Where possible, the foliage pads should slightly overlap each other to give depth to the image. Back to Michael's Mugo. Caz asked where the front of the tree was, Michael's response was that it changes from year to year. Caz explained that when styling a tree, she works up from the roots (nebari), and finds the front where the roots are "Asymmetrical" (see above) or at least at their widest, and any problems such as inverse taper or crossing roots are hidden. Next you look at the trunk, is there taper and movement? Does the movement of the trunk and position of the apex complement the style of the tree? For most styles, the apex should sit above the nebari, to stop the tree looking unbalanced. Caz's advice was to change the angle of the tree at its next repotting, in order to bring the apex over the roots and then bring down the branches on the left, to complement the new angle.

The foliage pads also need some pruning in order to encourage back budding. See image below.



Caz also explained that August was the perfect time for pruning Pines with scissors. In the spring you work on the new shoots, reducing the strong ones and allowing the weaker ones to elongate. Feed younger trees throughout the growing season and reduce or stop feeding for mature trees from April, in order to reduce needle size. Allow the tree to dry out between watering and then at the end of July into August, prune back branches in order to encourage back budding in the following spring. The more ramification you get on Pines, the smaller the needles become. So, get those scissors out! Another tip was to use foliar feed on weak branches in order to give them a boost. Don't spray the whole tree that will defeat

the object, just spray the weaker areas such as lower branches on a cascade tree. Caz uses Maxicrop which is seaweed plus complete garden fertiliser that is sprayed onto the leaves as per directions, or fish emulsion and seaweed.





Next up was a Hinoki Cypress belonging to Hilly. This was one of the trees auctioned at our July meeting and it had been cultivated for a few decades, but was now very overgrown.

When you are looking at bonsai or potential bonsai it is important to look at them at eye level. You should be looking at the middle of the tree, not down on it which is interesting when you consider how bonsai are usually displayed in shows and gardens. So look into the tree and visualise how it could look and what you would need to do to achieve that image. Move the tree around, have a rummage

around in the roots – is there a nebari? Tilt the tree and look at it from every possible angle. It might be upright at the moment but could it become a cascade or visa versa. Often with Hinoki you get a big grafting wound towards the base which can make styling them problematic, unless you are prepared to do some carving.

After a bit of consideration Caz decided that this material could make a nice literati style tree. The trunk has movement and taper and the lower branches can be made into jin. Caz said that she always leaves jin long until the final design of the tree is set, and then shorten the jin appropriately, as that often dictates the required length. You can't add wood once you have cut it off, as my old woodwork teacher used to yell! It might also be possible to add some shari (areas of dead wood on the trunk) to connect some of the jin and give more movement to the trunk. However this would need to be done in stages, otherwise the health of the tree would suffer. The tree will also need repotting but not in the same year as styling it.



Jin created and remaining foliage ready for some wire.

At this point in the proceedings, it was Caz's turn to ask a question. "Who likes wiring"?

In response, three people put their hands up. This response is not unusual and Caz termed wiring as "a necessary evil". However if you want to get the best from your Pines, Junipers and most other conifers then you will have to wire and Caz explained that the end result and detail that you can achieve with good wiring, far outweighs the time and effort required. In fact with Pines and Junipers you will not achieve an old, rugged image without some wiring even on great yamadori material. With deciduous material you can often dispense with wiring once the basic structure has been set but even then you often see "guy wires" being used.



Next up on the turntable was a nice little Juniper belonging to Richard P. Unfortunately, for us bonsai nuts, there are many different kinds of Juniper and it is often difficult to decide which variety a tree it is, unless you still have the garden centre tag! This one has both juvenile (spiky) and adult (smooth) foliage at the same time. To start with, Caz identified the best "front" of the tree. Luckily Richard agreed and Caz explained that the best "fronts" involved the main branches bending around the trunk, towards the viewer. "Giving you a hug, but not too much of one" as Caz said. As with other bonsai, the apex should lean

towards you, giving the tree some stability. Caz thought that this was a good tree which just needed a bit of refinement. "Clean bottoms and tidy crotches" is Caz's mantra. Meaning, the bottom of each foliage pad should be smooth and not have any stray bits sticking out. Likewise the "crotch" between each pair of branches should not have any foliage obscuring the area.

Richard's tree was in need of a good "bottom and crotch" cleaning to better define the foliage that was there. There were also a couple of branches that could be wired to give multiple layers of foliage pads, rather than one large one. Smaller foliage pads, particularly on smaller trees, give you that "big" tree image rather than looking like a shrub. Caz also explained that a good tree needs a good pair of shoes, meaning put it in a better pot. This tree would be vastly improved, by repotting it into a shallower pot.

The next tree was another Cyprus belonging to Richard M. This tree was having a bit of an identity crisis in that it didn't have a well defined style. Was it a clump style, a broom style or something else? So first task was to decide what it should look like, and then style it appropriately. Caz felt that the best thing to do with this tree was to spread out the trunks/branches to form a clump style and deal with any that crossed each other.

There was also a bit of an issue with a large root that crossed the trunk, see image above. Caz felt that removing this root could result in losing one or more of the main branches.

And as previously mentioned, remove any dead foliage, seed pods, cones or unwanted foliage to give a clean look.



Next tree was another Juniper, possibly a procumbens or squamata, belonging to our chairman Ade.

This is an old tree, originally dug up from a garden. The dead wood is all original, however the foliage is quite coarse and Ade was wondering if it was possible to graft on some better foliage such as Itoigawa. Caz agreed that it would be possible and that Ade would end up with a tree that looked more refined and ultimately worth more, if that was what he wanted. There were a couple of other issues with the tree, that Caz pointed out. Firstly the main branch had dead wood along it making it very difficult to bend and secondly the live vein

running up the trunk was coming away from the dead wood. So what to do? Firstly, get some strong glue and glue the live vein back in place (who knew?) Use some wire to hold it together and keep it there unless it is being shown. Hopefully that should stop any further deterioration. As far as grafting on new foliage, Caz explained that with trees such as Junipers and Yews, which have live veins. The live wood should always be visible from the front, rather than all dead wood. So with this tree you would first need to establish the best front, which would be the back of the tree in the image above. Then you would need to decide if you

wanted to graft or to keep the needle foliage. If keeping the foliage, then it would be a case of removing all the dead needles from the interior and then wiring the branches to form an apex and lower branches. The tree would also benefit from being repotted with the trunk leaning over to the right and the main branch being repositioned closer to the trunk. Caz explained that styling bonsai is all about making the most of what you have and hiding the faults. All trees have faults, with the exception of deciduous trees that have been grown from seed, where the nebari, trunk taper and branch placement have all been carefully controlled. With Pines, Junipers and yamadori trees, you get what you get and have to learn to make the best of it. Highlight the good points; live veins, dead wood etc. and then hide the faults by changing the angle of the trunk and placing your foliage pads to mask straight areas of the trunk or inverse taper. If Ade decides to graft on foliage then the above will still apply, in terms of front and trunk angle. The tree is very healthy so it should respond well, and it will be a matter of deciding where to place the new branches. Potentially this should be done in several stages, making sure that the grafts have good contact with the cambium and that the graft is given time to develop. Caz explained that the worst thing people do with grafts and air layers is fiddle with them, this causes damage and ultimately failure. Leave them alone for as long as you can.

The next tree was another Squomata Juniper belonging to Michael. Michael has been working on this tree for a good few years now, and had got it to show standard. However the last winter decimated the tree and most of the foliage and live veins have now died off leaving the tree a shadow of its former self. What to do?

Cas agreed that we have had a lot of bonsai mortality this year. However it is not all bad, as sometimes nature can push us into areas that we wouldn't have chosen to go into. Looking at what was left of the tree, Caz decided that she would jin all of the right hand trunk and



then bring the left hand trunk down, with a clamp and some guy wires. This would compact the tree and allow a new set of foliage pads and an apex to be built up using the remaining branches. The tree would end up smaller but more dynamic with all the dead wood. John suggested that we could work on that at the next meeting, which is due to be a workshop. So watch this space.

John and Caz get busy with the wire and jin pliers.



Another tree that caught Caz's eye was this formal upright Juniper, of unknown variety. Caz termed this as a "Forest tree", even though it is a juniper. The overall image is of a tall, mature tree in a forest clearing and as such it will need styling as a mature tree.

Spruce, Larch, Hemlock etc are all often styled to look like Forest trees, so how do you do that?

To achieve that image there are two main things that you need to do. Firstly, you need to create a domed apex rather than a pointed one. Then you need to pull most of the branches down. I say most, as the upper branches and those making up the apex will range from horizontal to upright, as they will represent younger branches and therefore will not have had the same weighing down by nature as the lower ones. Any branches that would touch the ground when lowered should be turned into jin. The tree would also benefit from repotting into a simple round or oval pot that is slightly shallower than the present one. This would accentuate the image of the tree. With this style of bonsai the phrase "less is more" is very apt. Foliage pads are kept sparse as you are trying to create a big tree image with as little foliage as possible, otherwise it will start to look like a shrub and you never want that in bonsai.



After 30 minutes work, it is starting to look like a forest tree.



The Tree of the Month

The theme was – “Pines and Junipers” and once again this prompted a range of entries. You can see them below and if you would like to read the judge’s comments then click [here](#).



Richard M's Scots Pine



Richard P's White Pine



Tony M's Cedar



Nigel's Scots Pine



Michael's Mugo Pine

The winner of the people's vote was Richard P's White pine and the judge's choice, was Tony M's Cedar. Both worthy winners.



After the break Caz finished with a demonstration on how to prune Junipers, using a small Itoigawa Juniper.



Caz started, by explaining that there are a lot of different ideas on how to prune Junipers. There is also a lot of misinformation that leads to sickly and even dead bonsai. So, what should we be doing? Firstly, we need to understand how Junipers grow. It is perfectly natural for them to produce foliage extensions in some places but not in others. They tend to be very random and, in some cases, stop producing any shoots for a while. Don't panic this is also perfectly natural. In these cases, the tree is still growing but it is swelling rather than producing foliage.

So how do you deal with these extensions when they appear? If you are maintaining the tree then you need to cut the extensions using scissors. Put the tip of the scissors about a third of the way down the shoot and cut. Why a third of the way? If you think of the extension like the gearbox in a car. You have 1st, 2nd all the way to 5th gear and the extension is like these 5 gears. If you cut the extension at 1st or 2nd gear you risk stalling the growth. Cutting it at 5th or 4th should not stall the growth. You can then go in later and reduce it a bit more which gives the tree time to adapt to the loss. If you want to extend a branch then leave the new growth until it has reached a suitable length, then prune it using the same process. If you look at some of the old books, they will show you how to finger pinch all the foliage back to old growth. This is a sure way to kill your tree, or if you are lucky to produce juvenile foliage all over which will take a long time to change into adult foliage. You are in effect, taking all the energy from the tree and eventually it will give up. As well as dealing with the extensions, you also need to thin out the growth in the interior. This foliage does not contribute to the design of the bonsai and can make the bonsai look like a shrub rather than a tree. What you are looking to end up with are branches with good strong foliage on the ends that can be wired to produce nice domed foliage pads. Caz asked if anyone had read Michael Hagedorn's book "Bonsai Heresy". If you haven't then it is well worth reading as it explodes a lot of bad practice and misunderstood concepts in bonsai, such as repotting. In the West, we repot our bonsai far too often and take off far too much soil. In Japan they may not repot an established conifer for 10 or 15 years. If it looks OK, then it is OK! They also repot by removing an inch or two of "soil" around the roots and off the bottom then back in the same pot with new growing medium filling in the gaps. Job done! Deciduous will be repotted more often but not every year. Think of it this way – when you cut off roots the tree concentrates on rebuilding those roots and whilst it is doing that it is not producing foliage, which is the stuff we want to play with. As well as repotting, you need to think about how you "feed" your trees but that is a subject for another time, or you could buy the book!

Or, [Bonsai for Everyone](#)

Well, that's it for another month. Thanks to Caz for a great night and I look forward to seeing her suggestions being put into practice over the coming years.

Next meeting is on the 13th September and will be an Autumn workshop – time to clean up your trees before winter comes and put some of Caz's ideas into practice.

Tree of the Month will be "Shohin or smaller".

Until then take care and keep doing bonsai!

Alistair