



SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

Bonsai Newsletter January 2023



Geoff's lovely collected Larch with accent planting and okimono

Welcome back to a new year (2023), a new name (Somerset Bonsai Society) and a new topic for our first meeting of the year (Celtic bonsai). We were lucky to have, as our guest speaker, renowned bonsai artist and collector of native trees, Chris Thomas.

Chris started off with a bit of background on his life in bonsai. Chris has been into bonsai for a long time, 350 years in tree years or so he says, and up until 15 years ago he was quite happy working with the usual bonsai species, Japanese imports and European yamadori.



Chris and John all set up and ready to go.

Then he started to feel that there was something missing and that was working with native trees. Thus "Celtic Bonsai" was born. Celtic bonsai is the term Chris gives to his use of material from his native Wales. All the trees he uses, the moss and even the slabs that he plants his groups on are collected in Wales. Chris explained that he still works with Japanese imports as that is what some of his clients want, but his first love is native trees. There is also a practical aspect of growing native trees for bonsai as they will virtually look after themselves. You don't have to worry about moving them into a greenhouse for frost protection. Oak, Pines, Hawthorns and Larch all love the winter and rarely need any form of protection. You also get to see your trees every day which helps with their design and progression.

So, it's a win-win situation with native plants.



A small selection of the trees and bonsai sundries that Chris brought to his talk.

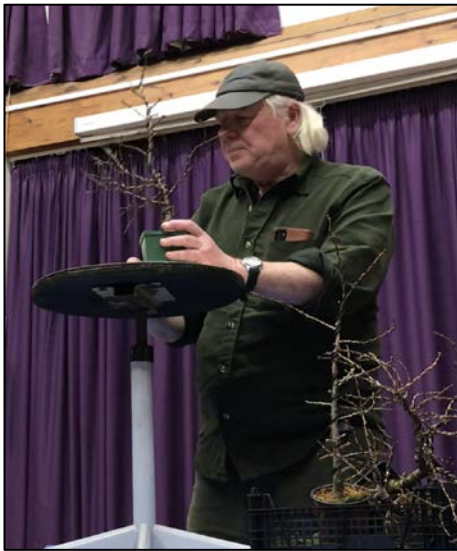
Another aspect of working with native material is that it frees you up from following any rules associated with Japanese or Chinese styles. Chris explained that everyone's perception of what a tree should look like is formed by the environment in which they are brought up. However, if you learn from Japanese "Master" then you will design trees the way that they design them, following the accepted styles of "Japanese bonsai". The same with Penjing. But Chris does not work that way. He teaches technique and then the student can use those techniques to design the trees that they see. This results in the production of more interesting trees and happier students.

An eager audience waits.

This doesn't mean that we forget about bonsai styles. We can still describe a tree as windswept or upright but that is just an easier way of explaining what you are trying to convey with your design.

Chris started off his demonstration by taking some individual collected Larch that had been potted up a year ago and styling them in "traditional" styles.





Chris explained that he had spent a few days pre-wiring them and this would allow him to concentrate on styling as no one wants to watch him wiring! So how easy is it to style a tree?

Chris explained that whilst it is not difficult, there is no substitute for practice. You need to work on trees, practise wiring and develop your ability to transfer what is in your mind to the material you are working with. What you want to achieve is a triangle. The older the tree the wider the triangle. Starting with the base (Nebari) you want to have a trunk line and some taper, from base to tip. If you haven't got that, then you will need to develop it by growing on the material. Then you look at branch placement and thickness. Are the lower branches thicker than the higher branches and do you have taper in the branches from trunk to tip? The easiest way to style a tree is to have the triangle over the base. Do this and you will always have a presentable tree. However, it might not be the most interesting tree.



By offsetting the apex you will create more movement and often a feeling of "tension" in the design. Two other things to consider are the form of the tree, conifers have downward pointed branches and broadleaf trees have upward pointing ones. Older trees have rounded tops and young trees have a single apex. Older trees also have more ramifications in their branches and more layers.



All you really need to know in bonsai is how to ramify or as Chris explained it " the three things you need to know in bonsai are; ramification, ramification and ramification. So, when you are creating your "Illusion" of an old tree, try incorporating these. Chris explained that when working with Larch you should be able to develop a tree to show standard within three to five growing seasons, providing you are applying the correct feeding and pruning regimes. Done correctly you can get three growths in a season, giving you your ramification.

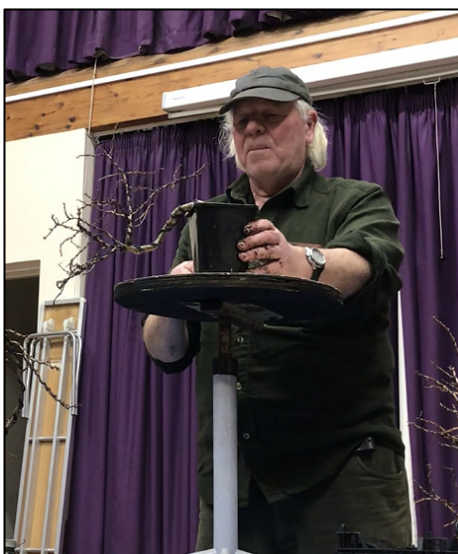


The crowning glory of any bonsai is the "Tree/pot" combination, done correctly it lifts the tree onto a higher level.

The next tree was a tall thin trunk Larch which Chris styled in the "[Literati](#)" style. This style comes from the 16th century Chinese and Japanese art movement, which moved away from the rigid court style painting and focused on a freer more abstract style. Trees and landscapes are represented by a few well-chosen brush strokes, less is more!



The beauty of this style, from the point of view of the bonsai designer is that you can use material with thin trunks and fewer branches than in other styles and if you have access to collected material ([Yamadori](#)) you can use those trees that have extreme movement in their trunks. If this young material does not have the required movement, with a bit of wire and some well thought out bends the trunk takes on the appearance of a tree that has been plucked from high on a mountain. The branches should follow the flow of the trunk and show movement throughout their length. Chris pointed out that when bending branches, it is important to support the branch where it joins the trunk, otherwise you can tear the branch from the trunk.



Whilst this style is considered one of the simplest forms it is actually one of the hardest to get right. It needs to be elegant, light and yet convey a feeling of age and the struggle of an old tree against nature's extremes.

The classic literati pot is a shallow, round drum pot or a "nanban" style one. Google them to see examples. For this tree, Chris chose a shallow round pot with a sandy glaze, as this is a deciduous tree.



The last style Chris demonstrated was the cascade. When looking at raw material for bonsai it is important to ignore the way that it is currently planted in its container. A tree can grow straight up, at an angle or as in this case be wired to fall below the rim of the pot. This is another useful style for dealing with material that is not suited to any of the other designs. A tree with all its branches at the top can make a very nice cascade or semi-cascade.

Chris explained that he has a "bit of a thing" about the way that people often style cascades. The design should form a whole unit and not have the tree too far away from the pot. By angling the trunk so that the "triangle" of foliage caresses the pot you get a much more harmonious image

For a pot, you need to provide stability to the design so a deeper, round or square pot should be used. In the image above the front of the tree is where Chris' index finger is, so we are looking at the side of the design.



Next Chris designed a traditional group planting, again using collected Larches and a traditional pot. As Chris was using young material with thin trunks, he decided to go for a Literati style with the trees fanning out, rather than have them all vertical.

Before assembling the group Chris roughly styled each, explaining that it is virtually impossible to wire and bend the trees once they are positioned in the pot. You can make final adjustments but not major bends. Following a question from the audience, Chris explained that aesthetically it is better to have an odd number of trees in the group until you reach seven trees. Thus, 3, 5 and 7 trees can be positioned so that each tree can be seen and contributes to the overall design. From 8 onwards the individual trees become less dominant and the overall image becomes more important. Think about looking at a small group of trees on a hill. I bet that we would all look at each one individually and also count them but would we do that when looking at a large forest? Aesthetics basically boils down to what we like and what pleases us visually. Chris discussed the concept of aesthetics and how some people have it and some do not. The Japanese are very good at refining things down to the bare bones of what looks good, in all of their artistic endeavours but that doesn't mean we can't learn how to do it ourselves. It just takes practice.



Having shaped each tree, Chris moved on to preparing the pot. When using wire to secure the trees it is important to be able to identify which wires are which, so Chris marks the ends of each wire in order to differentiate it from the others. Putting a right-angle bend in the ends of one wire then two bends in the next and so on. This ensures that the wires remain secure and tight once the planting is finished. You can also use the green garden canes, split into thinner stakes, to secure the root balls of the trees together. Pushing them through each root ball allows the whole group to be secured with a minimum number of wires and eventually the stakes will rot away leaving the group secure.



When creating the group, the tallest tree is generally situated in the front. The next one sits as close to the primary one as possible and the third one is placed towards the back to provide depth. The remaining trees are then used to fill in gaps in the design. All of the trees should be visible from the front and should not cross any other trunks. Another tip from Chris - if you have placed all the trees and are not happy with the design, then take them out and start again.

If it doesn't look right now then it won't look right later on.

Once the trees are secured in the pot you can then start refining the placement of the branches and remove any that no longer fit with the design, particularly in the interior of the group. You also need to ensure that there are no competing trees, they should all be different heights and taller in the front and shorter in the back to provide perspective. The finished design. All that it needs now is some moss and time to ramify



Chris then demonstrated his "Celtic" bonsai by putting together a group of collected Larch on a large piece of Welsh slate. Living in Wales, Chris is heavily influenced by the trees that he sees on the hills and mountains. Rugged, windblown, surviving the ice and snow and the odd rockslide, these are trees with a distinct character and if you are used to seeing "normal", spreading, parkland trees then they may look a bit extreme.

Celtic bonsai reflects the character and movement seen on these uplands and coastal areas.



So back to the group. Chris reminded everyone that a group planting should not have a great tree in it! If the tree is great then use it on its own. Groups are about the overall image not the individual trees. There are several ways of preparing the wires for planting. You can drill holes straight through the slab and place your wires as normal or, as Chris did with this slate, you can partially drill through and glue in the wires with epoxy glue. With slabs, you don't need to worry about drainage as the water will run off naturally.



Larch trees are very amenable when it comes to back budding and Chris explained his approach to ramifying branches. In the spring when the buds have broken, he removes the end bud on the branch. This should prompt any dormant buds on the branch to activate. Then around July he removes the dominant bud from the new shoots, which should force any remaining dormant buds to break. Once these new buds have developed into shoots, he will remove the tips as before. Doing this will produce the desired - branch, twig, twig - that gives a bonsai its mature look. Another good styling tip was that a lower branch doesn't have to stay a branch.



Wiring it upwards can turn it into a trunk making a single trunk tree into a twin trunk and in group plantings this can add character to the overall design. Having some trunks laying along the ground or extending past the edge of the slab also adds dynamism to the design by breaking up the flow.

The final stage in the planting was using a variety of mosses, collected in Wales, to under plant the trees. The moss is secured with wire staples and as well as looking good, helps the potting medium stay on the slab during watering.

The trees were collected from Seven Sisters in the Dulais Valley, the moss is from Chris' garden and the slate is from Dolgellau and there you have it - Celtic Bonsai.

Tree of the Month competition 2023 - Winter Image

During tea break, we had our TotM judging. As there were only two entries this didn't take long and the winner of the public vote was - Tony's Trident Maple with 5 votes.



Richard's Oak.



Tony's Trident maple.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Chris for an excellent evening and if you have not yet taken the opportunity to see Chris speak then you really should, you won't regret it and maybe you will end up doing some "Celtic" bonsai yourself.

Next meeting is on Wednesday 8th February and will be our annual auction.

Non-members are welcome to come along and bid on lots, so if you are in the area please do drop in and bag a bargain.

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

Alistair