



SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

Bonsai Newsletter October 2023



Ade's Zelkova

Welcome to the October meeting report. This month we had a critique of member's trees by professional bonsai grower and Society President, John Trott, and semi-professional grower and Society Chairman Ade. Ade would probably deny being professional but one look at his trees will show you otherwise. This is always a popular night with members and we had a large number of trees to get through. So, without further ado:-



Nigel's Spruce

Nigel had brought along a medium size Dwarf Spruce that had been in his possession so long he had forgotten where it came from. First rule of styling bonsai – find the front. This caused a bit of discussion as the owner and everyone else chose different fronts! Both Ade and John felt that the best front had the apex leaning forward and there was a clearer view of the trunk line, see image above. John asked where Nigel had placed the tree in his garden, as it was rather “two dimensional” with little in the way of back branches. This can happen when we forget to rotate our trees, so that they get sun on all their foliage. If you can, a good method is to place the tree on a turntable, the

cheap plastic ones used for cake decorating are ideal. This way you can easily turn the tree to any direction and avoid die-back due to lack of sunlight. Ade asked when the tree had last been trimmed and Nigel replied “about 5 hours ago”! John explained that Spruce and Cedars will back bud from old branches so there is hope for this tree to fill in the gaps from lost branches.

Ade suggested that a bit of wiring to re-position some of the branches would go a long way to making the tree look better and John suggested a bit of pruning to remove the old needles and dead shoots. At the moment the tree has a lot of long shoots around the apex but only short shoots on the lower branches. Keeping the apex trimmed will rebalance this and encourage budding on the lower branches.

Nigel taking his tree away for some urgent wiring. When John had finished his pruning Nigel took over and wired the tree according to John's directions.



John C's English Oak

Next up was an English Oak belonging to John C. John had purchased the tree on the club website; it had been in the collection of a gentleman who could no longer care for them. The tree was in that pot when John got it and all that he had done was a bit of wiring on some of the branches. John T, started by explaining that Oaks and Willows do not like wire and hard winters. His advice was to remove the wire if it looked like the tree would be experiencing freezing temperatures and then re-apply the wire in the spring.

Ade felt that the main issues were that the tree looked very two dimensional, a common problem, and had several “bar branches” – branches coming out of the trunk opposite each other. John would need to decide which of these branches needed removing and then

wire the remaining branch into a flowing, downward direction. John explained that when you wire a tree, branches should be positioned so that they all go down at the same angle. You shouldn't have some branches going up and others



going down. John also reminded everyone that when wiring you should try to wind the wire on at around 45° and never cross wires as that was a sure way of strangling the branch. Lastly, Ade suggested that reducing the height would make the tree look more “in scale”. Taking the top 6 inches off would promote budding and hopefully form a better apex.

John’s Oak after repositioning of the branches.



John C’s Hawthorn

John had also brought a Hawthorn, which had the same issue, bar branches, as well as a very straight lower trunk. John T commented that all too often, we try to put our trees into a bonsai pot long before they are ready. It is better to place them in some form of “growing” container or even in the ground to allow them to develop freely and generate the growth that we need when trying to style the tree. If you want to use a “bonsai pot” then use a bigger one. As I have said before, I tend to grow my “potensai” material in round Mica pots, several sizes too big for the finished

tree. This way I can try different “fronts” and the tree has plenty of room to grow. John said that he uses round Terracotta or plastic pots and keeps the tree in them for several years. Both agreed that this tree was not ready for a bonsai pot and would benefit from repeatedly growing on and then cutting back.

When cutting back Hawthorns, make sure that you cut back to the bud above the one you want to use as Hawthorns always die back one bud. John also reminded us that Hawthorns tend to grow in very wild and rugged ways. Think about the ones you see on the tops of moors, shaped by the wind. You won’t see a straight trunked, formal upright style there, so try and copy those forms in your bonsai Hawthorne.



Nigel’s Shishigashira Japanese maple

Next on the turntable was a Japanese Maple Shishigashira, belonging to Nigel. The main question was “how do you prune them”? Ade admitted that he had never grown this variety however John has, and explained that they are difficult. They do not respond to pruning in the same way as other varieties. They have this very tight foliage and often suffer from apex dieback. John has seen Japanese imports of this variety, very expensive trees, suddenly lose their tops and has also experienced this with trees that he has grown from cuttings. The way that John deals with them is to cut new growth back to one set of leaves

and hope that they ramify. You can't really wire them as they are very brittle and they have a habit of the branches growing back on themselves. So, the best way is to clip and grow, leaving plenty of room for foliage to droop down. The general opinion was that there were better varieties of Japanese maple to use as bonsai and that Shishigashira and Kotohime are best left to those who really like a challenge, and a lot of disappointment!



Bob's Shishigashira maple

Interestingly, this Shishigashira belonging to Bob has not suffered any of the issues that Nigel's has. Bob bought this from a garden centre and at the time it was not in the best of health so Bob planted it in a south facing part of his garden, this variety is very tolerant of strong sunlight so ideal for these locations, and left it to recover. After a few years it looked so good that he decided to dig it up and grow it as a bonsai. A year ago, he took two air layers from branches that crossed and the tree has continued to grow well and is very healthy. In fact, it is still pushing

out new growth, this late in the year.

The advice from John was the same as for the previous tree. Keep on top of the new growth and allow plenty of room for branches to develop. Ade commented that there seemed to be two sets of roots and that the tree would benefit from having the lower set cut back and then the tree planted a bit lower at the next repotting. He also pointed out that the two trunks were similar in diameter and that the tree would look better if Bob choose one as the dominant trunk and developed that, possibly changing the angle of the tree as well.



Paul B's Japanese maple (possibly Atropurpureum)

Paul wanted to know what to do with it. Ade explained that it was very early days for this tree and that it needs to go into a growing pot or the ground in order to gain vigour and produce plenty of material to work with.

Maples respond well to pruning and the process of growing, then cutting back, then growing, will quickly develop a nice healthy tree suitable for putting into a bonsai pot. There were also a couple of areas where the branches had three shoots on the end so these would need reducing to two.

Paul will need to decide on how big a tree he wants, then grow it on and develop taper in the trunks or cut it back and develop short compact foliage accordingly. For now, enjoy the autumn colour and then start the heavy work next spring.

Paul B's Willow experiment



As well as working on his Maple, Paul is experimenting with growing a Weeping Willow. Ade has not grown Willows however John has a lot of experience and will readily admit to them being a real pain to maintain. In nature, Willows weep due to the weight of the foliage however in bonsai there is never enough foliage to cause this weeping effect. So, we have to mimic it and that means wiring every branch and every shoot, and not allowing the wire to cut in, so unwiring it before that happens, then rewiring it etc, etc, etc! I know this myself, as I have been working on a small Black Willow,

which I thought would make a nice companion for my Tamarisk. It is a lot of work and of course we have to unwire it for winter, and start all over again in the spring. Anyone want to buy a Weeping Willow?

Back to Paul's tree. John's advice was to remove the wire for now, then in the spring put it in a bigger pot and have the tree a bit more upright, with a couple of curves in the trunk, so that when the branches are wired down, they do not fall below the bottom of the container. Then it will be a matter of growing, trimming and wiring till the desired image is obtained. All good practice for developing those bonsai skills. Ade commented that Birch trees are similar, in that they require wiring to develop the classic weeping look but suffer similar issues with cold and dieback of branches.

Richard M's Lodge Pole Pine.



Richard had brought a small Pine which he thought was a Scots Pine. On closer examination, Ade thought it was a Mugo Pine however technology won when John took a photo and uploaded it to his plant finder App.

Turns out it was a Lodge Pole Pine. Richard's main concern with the tree was a large root coming out of the trunk about an inch above the rest of the roots - what to do with it? Ade explained that removing it would leave the trunk with inverse taper and that the best option would be to wire the root down and closer to the trunk. However, this proved difficult as the Pine had very thin bark and the wire ended up damaging the bark.

Plan B, let the bark on the root heal then over the course of time draw the root closer to the trunk, or replant the tree at an angle to lessen the appearance of the root. The other issue with this tree was a general lack of structure due to no wire and multiple branches coming out of the same places on the trunk. So, reduce the number of branches, pluck the old needles and put some wire on it. Job done!



Hilly's Juniper Procumbens

Hilly brought along an interesting Juniper in a very "Avant guard" container made by his own fair hand.

The tree was fully wired and showed some skills in both technique and design. Originally found in the reject section of a Garden Centre, two years ago, Hilly has done all the work on it. Both John and Ade liked the way that it has been planted, so that it twists around the container rather than just growing down one side. With semi-cascade and cascade designs this gives the tree a much more dynamic look. The foliage

pads are well arranged and the only improvement would be making the apex a little more rounded. Oh, and a nice pot from a good potter! John explained that a common fault when designing cascade trees was to have the trunk bending from left to right etc. but not bending into the pot then away from it. This produces a very flat image, so make sure that you bend the trunk in all directions, just like Hilly's tree!

A better shot of Hilly's lovely cascade Juniper.



The Tree of the Month theme was – “Autumn colour”. You can see them below and if you would like to read the judge’s comments then click [here](#).



My Ginko



Richard P's Pyracantha



Richard M's Cypress clump.

The winner of the people’s vote was Richard P’s Pyracantha and the judge’s choice, was my Ginko. Well done to both.



What do we do with this?

As well as the Lodge Pole Pine, Richard had brought, well, a very challenging tree! A Japanese Maple, originally dug up with a digger, that Richard thought was dead but eventually it produced some shoots but not a lot. The trunk base is nice but the general advice was to reduce the dead wood on the upper trunk, feed it a lot and let one of the shoots grow up to six feet plus then cut back to a couple of inches then do it again and again until the tree has better taper and more foliage to work with. The dead wood on the

front and some of the larger roots will also need carving at some point but that will be a few years down the road. John mentioned that someone brought along a similar tree to one of his workshops, and that they used a Bosh Nano Saw to do all the carving rather than the usual rotary tools and cutting bits which most of us use. Quicker, easier and much less dangerous!

Richard's Western Hemlock

Ade wants to shorten the height. Fresh from winning the Tree of the Month, Richard brought a Hemlock, collected on one of the Society's previous trips.

Unfortunately, this tree has some deep wire marks in the middle section of the trunk and Ade commented that this does tend to happen with Hemlocks, if you are not on the ball. However, if you do take the wire off before it cuts in, then the branches tend to spring back so what to do? Well, it is just a matter of constant wiring and rewiring, till the branch sets. Ade said that the tree looks very elegant but the foliage pads are very flat and need a bit more movement. The overall design needs to be – a tall, straight tree with falling branches. In fact, your classic forest evergreen tree.



John's view was to remove the trunk at the point where the wire had cut in and then use a back branch to form a new apex.

Job done!



Another of Bob's hefty maples

This is another of Bob's garden trees, converted to bonsai. The trunk is quite thick and the roots are ok with the exception of one slightly ugly one that needs removing.

Bob felt that the tree needed some more branches lower down on the trunk and wasn't sure how to go about that. However both John and Ade agreed that the lack of lower branches could be overcome by making the tree taller. Bob has plenty of potential new leaders to choose from, and using one of these to increase the height would make a much better tree in the end.

Ade's Cotoneaster

Last, but not at all least, was Ade's Cotoneaster. Originally purchased from Trevor Banbury (see our April 2022 meeting report for more on Trevor and his trees) it had two trunks that crossed but one was quickly removed by Air Layering and the remains of the trunk converted into a jin and shari.

Ade then found that the main trunk had woodworm, and that once this was treated it left more dead wood to deal with. Over the last two years, Ade has developed the apex and foliage pads, letting the shoots grow out, then cutting them back and wiring them into position. Now Ade is interested in what other people think about the design and possible front. Whilst John was considering the design, Ade explained that one of the first things you should do when choosing material for bonsai, is to define the front. Looking at the roots that you have, nebari, and how they taper up to the trunk. Look at the trunk. Does it have any movement or special features that would make an interesting bonsai or will you need to wire it or carve it? Decide which branches can be kept and which need to be removed. All this and more will need to be considered before parting with our hard-earned cash. So, did Ade choose right?



John said that Ade had done well and that he felt the best front showed off the dead wood but also showed the foliage off to its best advantage in the way that it flows. The image above shows John's preferred front but what do you think?



Ade's preferred front, showing the jin, shari and nebari.

And so, our Critique ended on a high note. Hopefully you have picked up a few ideas to use on your own trees and who knows, you may see some of these trees at shows in the future.

Next meeting is on the 8th November and will be a discussion on pots and their role in bonsai cultivation and appreciation.

Tree of the Month will be "Tree & Pot combinations".

Until then take care and keep doing bonsai!

Alistair