



SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

Bonsai Newsletter October 2025



Welcome to the October meeting report. This month we were lucky to have David Cheshire, of David Cheshire Nurseries, talk to us about his way of doing bonsai with a focus on Maples and other deciduous trees. As with previous guest speakers, I will be sharing a few of his thoughts and experiences rather than giving you a verbatim account. After all I don't want to ruin any future talks!



Some of our members wait patiently, whilst others browse the goodies on offer.

David started off by giving us a bit of background. David runs a nursery in Coventry where he sells bonsai and Niwaki, arranges guided tours of Japan and also sells choice and rare plants.

David explained that his way of doing bonsai is a bit different from what we might have read in books or seen on videos. David learned a lot of his skills from teachers in Japan who primarily grew mame and shohin bonsai. This is something that he has continued to do when back in England and he is passionate about the need for us to produce our own bonsai stock rather than rely on importing them.

However, growing shohin and mame bonsai takes time and it can take between five and twenty years to produce a good-looking tree. This is one of the reasons that shohin bonsai are so much more expensive when compared to chuhin etc. David also commented that we need to understand the difference between bonsai grown commercially for sale, and bonsai grown in the traditional way.

We all know that you can speed up the process of creating a bonsai by growing them in the ground and allowing them to grow vigorously etc. however this is not how bonsai was originally practiced. Bonsai started as a way of appreciating nature and celebrating trees in all their guises. A lot of what we read in books today is actually a western take on bonsai and you can see this if you look at Japanese bonsai show albums from the 60's, 70's and 80's. Many trees being displayed look very "unfinished" to our eyes as we have become used to perfectly styled trees without a leaf or needle out of place. Not very "natural"! David makes a point of encouraging people to try and think outside of the "bonsai box" and produce quirky bonsai.



David starts with a few questions

Moving on to talk about Maples, David asked us what we wanted from our trees? Did we want amazing autumn colour or vibrant spring growth? Did we want larger leaves, smaller leaves or variegated ones? The answers to these questions will dictate what material we start with. Many maples found in garden centres are chosen because they are fast growing varieties. Great if you want a tree for your garden that will reach a good size quickly but not suitable for bonsai, unless you want to keep cutting back that growth all growing season. So, choose smaller leaved, slower growing varieties like the original Japanese Mountain Maple (Yama momiji) – *Acer palmatum* var. *matsumurae*.

David explained that he grows a lot of his maples from seed and his main aim is to produce a small fat trunked tree, which will go on to make a nice shohin bonsai. In order to do this, he allows the trunk to develop then cuts it back to the required height and selects a suitable bud to develop as the new trunk. So far pretty standard, however he then explained that a common mistake after doing this is to not allow the new trunk to develop enough to heal the old cut callus. In shohin bonsai, every scar detracts from the quality of the tree as there is no place to hide faults. So, care needs to be taken to heal those cuts completely, use wound sealant and don't be so quick to cut back new growth.

Another technique to aid callusing is to not cut off the whole trunk/branch but to undercut it, allow it to grow for another year then remove it. This allows the flow of sap into the area to aid callusing and creates a cleaner scar. Of course, during this process, you need to feed the tree heavily to promote all that new growth.



So, how old are these trees?

Having talked about the quick way of developing shohin bonsai, David then explained some of the older ways of achieving small, fat trunked maples.

David started by handing around a couple of small, fat trunked maples in plastic pots and asking the question 'How old are these trees?' They looked similar to the previous ones that turned out to be around three to five years old; however these were now twelve years old and were being grown slowly in order to develop aged bark. There is no real substitute for time when aging a tree's bark.

So, these trees are allowed to sit, grow slowly and after ten – twelve years they will be repotted into a slightly bigger pot then fed and watered well. This will then cause the trunk to swell and develop the aged looking split bark. Once this has happened, the rest of the tree will be developed.

Talking about repotting, David explained that with bonsai such as maples, he used a potting medium that catered for the worst weather conditions that the tree was likely to encounter. In this country that means having a free draining medium that will cope with the periods of heavy rain that we receive. After all, you can always add water to a pot but you can't take it away as easily!



A few of Davids bonsai and pre-bonsai.

Having talked through a variety of ways of developing the trunk and branches, David then moved on to the roots. One of the things that a lot of growers get wrong is removing the tap root too soon. We all appreciate a nicely developed nebari, however you rarely see these in nature. Trees have one sided roots and roots that cross and travel in odd directions. In the “old style” Japanese bonsai schools, these idiosyncrasies were accepted and even celebrated. So, why not cut off the tap root?

If you wait a bit that tap root can become the trunk and the twists and turns of the root as it moves through the soil will produce a more natural looking trunk than if you had wired it. It takes a very skilled eye to produce a natural looking trunk with wire. Humans are too methodical whilst nature just does what it wants, so if you want a natural looking trunk let nature do all the work.



So, how old is this Red Pine?

David then talked about some of his Red Pines. He showed a couple of young seedlings that he was growing by exposing the tap root, as mentioned above. Red Pines are very susceptible to disease and pollution, in fact in Japan a lot of the red pine forests are suffering due to pollution from China.

In this country they are vulnerable to our damp winters and can suffer fungal infections. So, with that in mind, how old do you think the Red Pine in the above image is? The tree was originally purchased from a lady in Japan, who grew it from seed and grew it for 35 years. David has had it for 10 years so the tree is 45 years old and is now showing the aged bark that is the main focus of these trees. This tree has always been grown in a small pot and has never had its roots pruned. This is the alternative method of growing bonsai that harks back to those old trees that were collected from the mountains and kept alive in small trays and pots. In fact, what you are doing is replicating the conditions one would find on a mountain side, where there is no one to feed or water the trees, yet they may live for hundreds, if not thousands of years.

But there is a drawback. David explained that growing them in this way does rely on the tree being super strong, and that to get ten trees like this he would lose a hundred. In fact, the ones that died were not worth growing anyway as they would always be susceptible to disease etc.

So, how does this slow growing style of bonsai relate to the way a lot of us are doing bonsai? David explained that it is very much a personal choice whether to produce bonsai relatively quickly, using commercial techniques, or to work in the old way and experiment with different species and styles. In Japan, some of his teachers such as Chiako Yamamoto and Katsuhiko Tomita prefer to work this way in order to continue the old way of bonsai. If you would like to read more about this approach you can have a look at the Shouzan-en bonsai nursery website, which is in English. This is the nursery run by Chiako Yamamoto, who was featured a few years ago on a short BBC documentary about Japan which is still available on both the IPlayer and on YouTube and is well worth looking at, if you haven't seen it before.

David then explained how some of his trees are shaped, not by wiring but by using the direction of sunlight to promote growth and encourage the tree to bend shoots towards the light. If you want a shoot to grow towards the right of the tree, place it so that the light comes from the tree's right and so on. Pruning is also a slightly different process with these small trees. If you just cut back a shoot then the energy that would have travelled to the tip will stop at the point of the cut and develop one or two new buds. What's wrong with that I hear you say! Well, these buds will grow strongly in response to the pruning and eventually you will get swelling at the cut point, which will then lead to those unsightly knuckles that you see on some bonsai, particularly deciduous ones.

To avoid this David removes all the leaves and buds from the shoot, back to the point where he wants to eventually make the cut. Then over the next growing season he ensures that no new buds or shoots grow on the shoot. Eventually the shoot will die but the tree will divert the energy, not to one or two buds at the cut point but to all the buds on that branch. This will then promote slower growth in those buds and better ramification. Yes, this is a slow process, taking a couple of years for each shoot but in the end, you will get much finer branch structure and ramification. The same process can be used on pines by removing the new buds at the tip of the shoot, this will promote finer back buds, or completely removing all the buds and needles from long shoots to promote die back and then the subsequent shorter needles and smaller buds.



During tea break, Ade judged the Tree of the Month from the entries below.

Tree of the Month competition 2025 – “Autumn colour”



John C's Chinese Elm



Richard M's Rowan



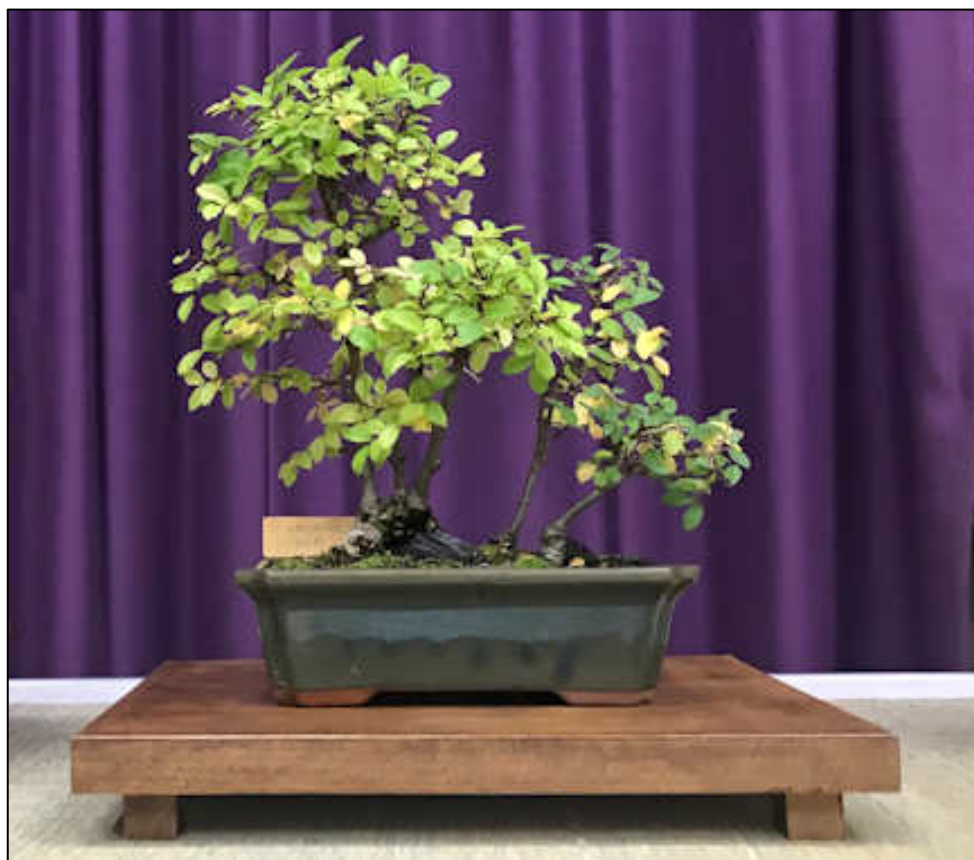
Nigel's *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Boulevard'



Peter's Korean Hornbeam.



Michael's Cotoneaster



Bob's Chinese Elm



Dave's Cotoneaster

The winner of the people's vote is: Michael's Root over Rock Cotoneaster. Well done.

If you would like to read the judge's comments on all the entries please [click here](#).

After the break David continued to talk about various Maple species that he grows for bonsai. In the image below David is explaining how he has started to develop some Snake Bark Maples and members got to handle one of his early examples. Although Snake Bark Maples tend to have larger leaves and a more rigid growth habit, these ones are developing much smaller leaves and are responding well to pruning. David mentioned that he has seen some very good examples of Snake Bark Maple bonsai in Japan and is keen to persevere with them, as they are known for their vibrant Autumn colour.



David's Snake Bark Maple.

Another Maple that is good for bonsai are Field Maples. Sadly, these tend to be overlooked in Britain or at the very least underrated because they are a native species and people tend to want exotic trees.

However, Field maples have a similar leaf to Snake Bark Maples, are easy to care for and develop thick trunks relatively quickly. David explained that if Field Maples were native to Japan, then there would be hundreds of Field Maple bonsai in Japanese nurseries and the same could be said for Scots Pines. The Japanese use what they can find in nature and we should be doing the same with our native trees.

David continued talking about the Amur Maple. I remember having one as a shohin bonsai thirty years ago but I haven't seen many for sale as bonsai material recently. Yes, I know someone will tell me that they are available everywhere but I haven't seen any, however, David rates them very highly. They are tough, they come into leaf early and cope well with frost and wind. The leaf is similar to Field and Trident Maples but has a bit more texture to the edges. The example David brought along started off as an imported bonsai from Japan. Unfortunately, the previous owner had a few problems caring for it and when David obtained it, for the princely sum of £20, all the lower branches had died and all that was left was two big branches growing upwards with a few leaves at the top. The previous owner had owned the tree for around twenty years and it was a well-established tree when he bought it, so this could be a tree in its seventies and the bark certainly supports that idea.

So, what to do with it? Well David started by air-layering the two long branches and produced two nice small trees with old looking bark. Then he cut back the rest of the branches and waited for new growth. Over the last four years, it has produced a lot of new growth and David is well on the way to creating a lovely shohin bonsai from material that others might well have discarded.



An Amur Maple gets a second lease of life

David completed his talk by explaining his process of feeding trees. A lot depends on the stage of development and also how he is growing the tree. Those that are being grown slowly with a view to developing aged bark will not get a lot of feed, perhaps a bit of foliar feed now and again whilst those being developed quicker will get more regular doses. David commented that feeding is probably the hardest thing to get right, after watering. It is dependant on so many different factors: local climate/micro-climate, how much time you devote to caring for your trees, evergreen or deciduous, the individual species, its age and stage of development etc.

One could argue that there is no right or wrong way, as long as you are giving the tree something. Obviously better quality feed will produce better results, providing that it is used properly. On younger trees using a high Nitrogen feed will produce more new growth, not something you want to do on a tree in the refinement stage, so use a low Nitrogen feed.

Observing your trees and looking for signs that you are not feeding them enough such as yellowing of the leaves, should prompt you to increase the feed available. Likewise, if your trees are putting on too much growth or the leaves are looking a bit purple, reduce the feed.

David then talked about the effects of rain on feeding. If you are using a water-based feed, then that will remain available to the roots until the next watering, or if it rains it will get washed out and the tree may not have enough to meet its needs. If you are using a solid feed then the tree will get access to feed every time you water or when it rains.

David explained that he often uses Osmacote granules for his trees in training, as he can put some in each pot during repotting and he knows that the tree will have a base level of feed available. On top of that, he then has a dosage system linked to his watering system, which will provide more feed, both root and foliar, every time he waters. This feed is given at quite a low concentration, but regularly, which hopefully overcomes the impact of rain on the trees.

In closing David reminded us to experiment: grow some trees from seed, grow some quickly, grow some slowly and try different species. But most of all enjoy your bonsai.

Next meeting is on the 12th November and will be our annual "Pot Night", although this year we are adding stands in to the mix. Always a fun night, learning how to match a tree to a pot and vice versa.

The tree of the month will be back, with "Tree and Pot combinations" as the topic.

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

Alistair