



SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

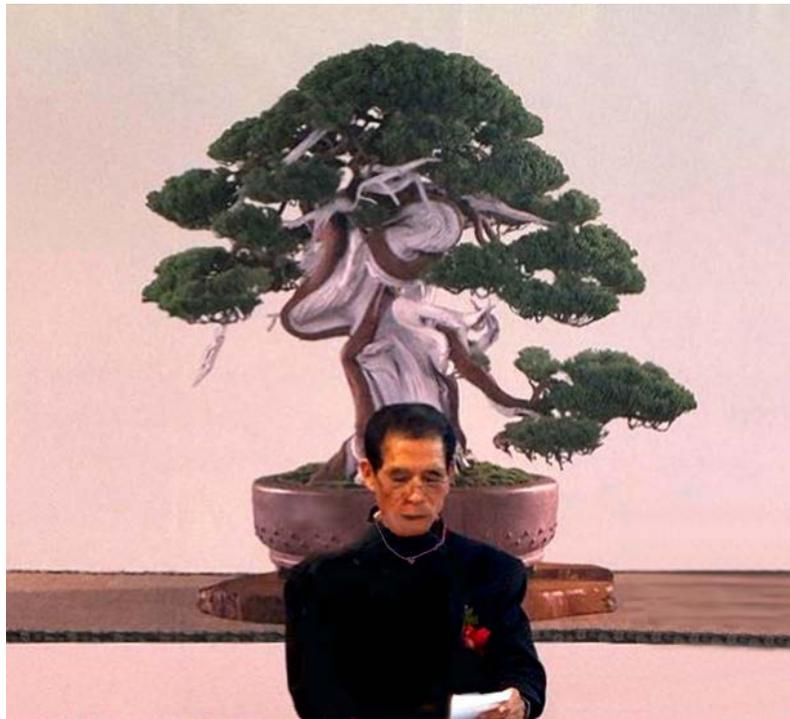
Bonsai Newsletter January 2026



Our President flying the flag for Somerset Bonsai Society.

Welcome to the first meeting report of 2026 and let me start by wishing you all a belated Happy New Year. To start our new programme we had a presentation by our President and professional Bonsai artist John Trott on his recent trip to Taiwan. Whilst there, John and his fellow bonsai aficionados, took in the Taipei Bonsai Association Annual Show, the Hwa Fong bonsai Exhibition, the WBFF (World Bonsai Friendship Federation) bonsai Exhibition, The Taiwan Suseki (Viewing stones) show and various bonsai nurseries along the way.

Taiwan is not a big Island, roughly 14,000 square miles which is almost twice the size of Wales - if that helps, but it ranks 20th in the world for GDP. What this means is that it is a rich country and some of that wealth finds its way to the hobby of bonsai which is very popular amongst all ages. The Taiwanese take their bonsai very seriously and with their 12 month growing season are able to develop exceptional trees in much shorter times than the rest of us; some of the trees you will see in this report are less than 10 years old! John started the presentation with a brief explanation of the accommodation, food and travel arrangements involved in negotiating their way around the island.



Opening of the Hwa Fong Bonsai Exhibition.

The Hwa Fong Bonsai Exhibition is now in its 30th year and is held in the Autumn. The exhibition consists of around 150 trees with 95 large trees and 12 shohin displays competing for the awards and the rest purely for general viewing.



A leaf pruned Celtis Sinensis (Chinese Hackberry).

The quality of the trees is exceptional and especially the Junipers as seen in the image above. These Junipers are not yamadori (collected). They are all grown in local nurseries, the twists and turns of the trunks and dead wood are all created by man using ropes, chains and clamps.

Sadly we are not allowed to import trees from Taiwan but they are doing a roaring trade with Japan, as you can imagine.



Hibiscus bonsai in full flower.

Being a semi tropical Island, Taiwan is famous for its flowering bonsai such as Hibiscus, Bougainvillea and Barbados Cherries. Due to the long growing periods and high humidity, these trees can be developed into mature bonsai within 5 to 10 years and the ability to leaf prune them several times a year develops ramification very quickly. The above tree would have been leaf pruned several weeks before the show resulting in a new crop of small fresh leaves, ready for display.



One of the 12 shohin bonsai displays at the Hwa Fong bonsai Exhibition

But it's not all big showy trees. In amongst the towering Junipers and Chinese Box, there are delicate little shohin trees that are the equal to anything that you will see at a Japanese show such as the Kokufu. The Taiwanese also love their carved wood and

there were lots of beautifully made root stands, tables and Jitta on display and for sale, however the prices were not for the faint hearted.



Ming, Mark, Phil, Wenting, John and Ann.

John explained that between watching the various official functions and viewing trees, they spent a lot of time eating. Like the rest of the Far East, people in Taiwan see eating as a function of social integration. Meet someone for the first time and they are likely to invite you to eat something, if you are unlucky they will invite you to an all you can eat buffet, and it's only 11am! So, there was a lot of meals but also a lot of networking. John commented that the most asked questions were around bonsai in the UK - was it popular, did young people like doing it, how much money did people spend on their trees? Sadly, it turns out that we have a long way to go before we reach the level of participation that you see from the Taiwanese.



A Black Pine at the WBFF show.

John went on to discuss some of the differences in the way that the Taiwanese style and display their trees. You could be forgiven for thinking that because Taiwan is close to China that their trees would follow the Chinese Penjing route. But that is not the case. If you asked any reasonable knowledgeable bonsai person where the above Black Pine was styled, you would get a range of answers; Japan, Europe even America but probably not China. Their Junipers are another example of the influence from Japan. They are grown and styled to look like yamadori from the mountains of Japan with lots of shari and jin and the twisting trunks that we associate with a life lived on the tree line. But if you look around you will find bonsai styled in less classical forms, more akin to Penjing, just bigger!

Eager crowds waiting to enter the exhibition.

Moving on from the Hwa Fong Exhibition, John and the rest of the party visited the World Bonsai Friendship Federation Exhibition. This show was organised as a warm up for the World Bonsai Convention, which will be held next year in Kuala Lumpur. The trees were exhibited outside in covered staging resembling Tokonoma and there were a number of guest demonstrators from around the world.



German Colmenares, from Spain demonstrating on a Taiwan Juniper.



**A Chinese Juniper grown in Taiwan,
styled like a Japanese yamadori.**

After several days spent looking around the exhibition, demonstrators and the various sales areas, John and the rest of the party visited a private garden/nursery run by 80 year old Madam Puli. Madam Puli specialises in growing Bougainvillea and has been at this site for 10 years. Many of the trees had been grafted to produce specific flower colour or size. Once the graft has been done it is covered with a plastic snap lock bag so that it can be opened and watered without damaging the graft. Clever!



Madam Pula, in the middle, at her Bougainvillea nursery

with her 89yr old husband on the far right.

John explained that the framework you can see in the picture above is there because of the regular Typhoons that are a feature of the area. The bonsai above will be approximately 5 - 10 years old.

Saying goodbye to Madam Pula and her husband the party moved on to view a few more nurseries including that of Mr Lee. He is acknowledged as one of the best Juniper growers in Taiwan and his ability to produce authentic looking "yamadori" Junipers is much in demand. John explained that Taiwan supplies bonsai material to many countries in Asia including Japan however it is not cheap and difficult to bring back in your hand luggage, just in case you were thinking about a collecting trip to Taiwan. John asked how Mr Lee managed to produce the twists and bends in his material and the answer was "machinery". This turned out to be chains, ratchets and good old brute force, with a lot of experience obviously! John also asked how they treat the dead wood. Did they use lime sulphur or wood hardener? The answer was "neither". When creating dead wood features they remove all the soft wood leaving only the red heart wood. This heart wood is tough and doesn't need any protection other than a cosmetic coating of lime sulphur. OF course they do have a lot of wood to play with so this technique works for them



Mr Lee with one of his home grown Junipers.

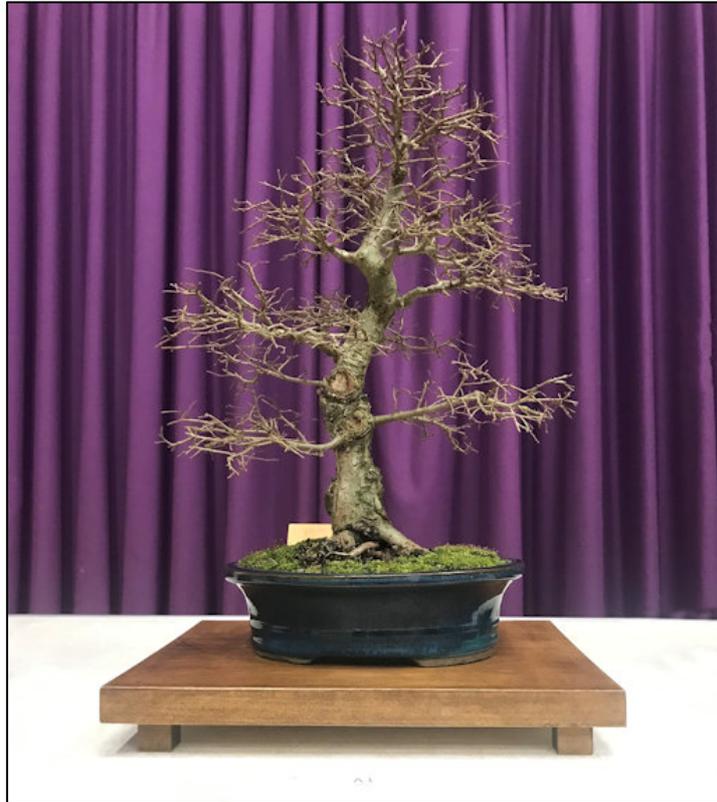
During tea break, we had our Tree of the Month judging.



John C's Chinese Elm.



Richard M's Birch.



Bob's Chinese Elm.



Peter's Metasequoia.



Zac's Cork Bark Chinese Elm.



Rogers Hawthorn.

And the winner of the people's vote is: Bob's Chinese Elm. Well done Bob, on your way to winning the trophy again.

Link to the judge's comments. somesetbonsai.uk/Reports/2026-January_Critique.pdf

Following the break John talked about his visit to the Taiwan Suiseki Exhibition. Suiseki or viewing stones as they are known in Taiwan are also big business. There is a Taiwan Viewing Stone Association with several thousand members as well as a number of museums dedicated solely to viewing stones. A lot of these stones are imported from mainland China but the way that they are displayed is unique to Taiwan.



No wooden stand for this massif rock.

Most of the stones are exhibited on very contemporary stands and are more in keeping with a modern art gallery rather than a bonsai show.



Galactic space stone anyone?

In closing John showed us a couple of stones that he had bought at the WBFF exhibition. These particular stone are very unusual and are called "Nail stones", Google Taiwan nail stones to see some examples. The stones and their stand are much more in line with Japanese Suiseki and no doubt will feature in one of John displays at some time in the future.

Well, that's all for now. Next meeting is on the 11th February and will be our annual auction. So lots of pots, trees and hopefully a bargain or two.

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

Alistair