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## SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

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Bonsai Newsletter May 2026



Ade's lovely semi cascade Hawthorn.

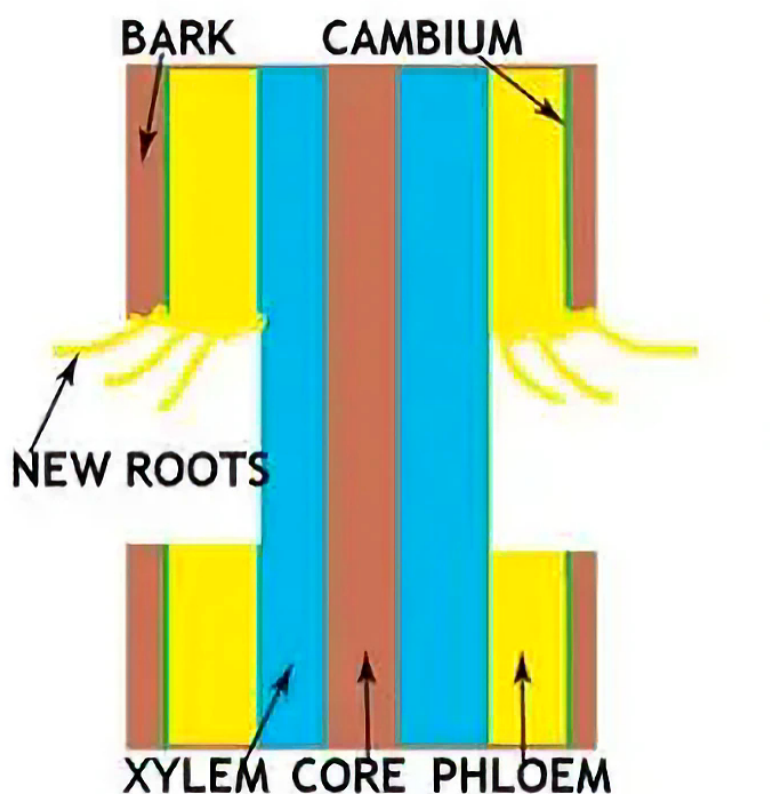
Welcome to the May meeting report. This month we were lucky to have our President and resident Professional Bonsai artist, John Trott, give us an in depth presentation and demonstration on the art of "Air layering".

So, first question; have you ever used air-layering to create or improve material for use as bonsai? If your answer is yes, then hopefully you can gain a few tips from the following presentation. If your answer is no, then I hope that you will be inspired to give it a try.

So, to answer a common question; why would I go to all that bother? As John explained, a lot of bonsai do not start out as perfect bonsai material. 1 in a 100 trees

from seed or cuttings may turn out suitable for use as bonsai. The rest will need help with developing radial roots (nebari) or changes to the trunk. This is where air-layering comes in. The technique involves the promotion of a new root base at a desired point on the trunk. This point can be anywhere; above or below a straight part of the trunk in order to remove or utilise the straight trunk. At the base of a fork in the trunk in order to create a twin, or more, trunked tree. Above the old root base in order to create new radial roots or on a side branch/apex of the tree, in order to use that branch/apex as the basis for a new tree. After grafting, it is one of the most useful bonsai techniques for improving material.

John started his presentation with a slide show, explaining the process of air-layering and then examples of trees that he had successfully air-layered over the years. His first piece of advice, was that successful air-layering started with ensuring that all of the Cambium and Phloem layers are removed from the area where you want new roots but that the Xylem layer is left intact.



The new root, once they start to grow will come out of the Phloem and Cambium layers. Damaging the Xylem layer will interrupt the movement of water and nutrients to the area and thus hinder the creation of new roots.

His second piece of advice, was that air-layering is easier if you have a second person to help you with the application of the moss and the tying of the plastic bags.

John showed several examples of trees where he had several applied air-layers to a trunk. He commented that a lot of people think that you can only do one air-layer at a time but this is not the case. If you have a long straight or suitably curved trunk then you can obtain several air-layers as long as you have branches that can provide nutrients to each air-layer and the room to cover the ringed area with moss etc. John

explained that he once air-layered a large Wisteria with 30 separate air-layers of which 28 rooted.

Someone asked if it was better to leave a strip, bridging the ringed area, rather than completely ring the trunk. John's response was that it was better to completely ring the trunk otherwise you are not having any confidence in your technique, you have to be positive.

Once you have removed the bark, Cambium and Phloem from your desired area, you need to apply rooting hormone to the upper part of the air-layer. John explained that he prefers to use the gel as it is easier to apply and that you need to be aware that rooting hormone is both a skin irritant, so wear gloves and that it has a short shelf life. So, don't use if it is over a year old.

Once you have applied the rooting hormone then it is time to cover the area with damp sphagnum moss. Another tip concerning the moss is to leave it around the roots when you finally separate the air-layer from the tree and plant it in your chosen growing medium. Don't try to separate it from the new roots as you risk damaging them. The moss will eventually rot away and growing medium will take its place. Whilst we are jumping ahead to the potting stage, John explained that he uses a long screw, placed through the bottom of the plastic pot with a washer and into the core wood of the new trunk. This secures the tree until it can produce enough roots to "stand on it's own two legs". Failing to secure the new tree well enough is another of the main reasons that air-layers fail.

Once you have enough moss around the rooting area then you can place the clear plastic around the moss. John explained that you need to use plastic that will not deteriorate in the sun and rain. So, no cling-film or bio-degradable plastics. Once the clear plastic layer is firmly secured, either with wire or cable ties then you can use the black plastic to cover the clear. This black plastic layer is essential as it help to heat the air-layer and encourage the generation of roots but also stops the new roots burning up in direct sunlight.

Now it's time to sit back and let nature take its course. You can add more water to the moss using a syringe, if you think that it has dried out, or undo the top wires and spray the moss if you don't have a syringe. Do not be tempted to keep checking for roots just leave it for a couple of months then gently undo the top of the black plastic. Can you see any roots in the moss? If the moss is full of root then it is time to cut off the air-layer and pot it up. If there are some roots but not enough to fill the clear plastic then add a bit of water to the moss and secure the black plastic again. Leave it for a few more weeks and then check again.

If there are no roots then sadly your air-layer has failed and you will have to wait till next spring to try again, if your tree does not die in the meantime. And yes, you can re-do an air-layer if it hasn't worked. If you started the air-lay in April then you might have enough time left in the current year to re-do the ring barking etc. If not, then you will have to try again next spring.

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



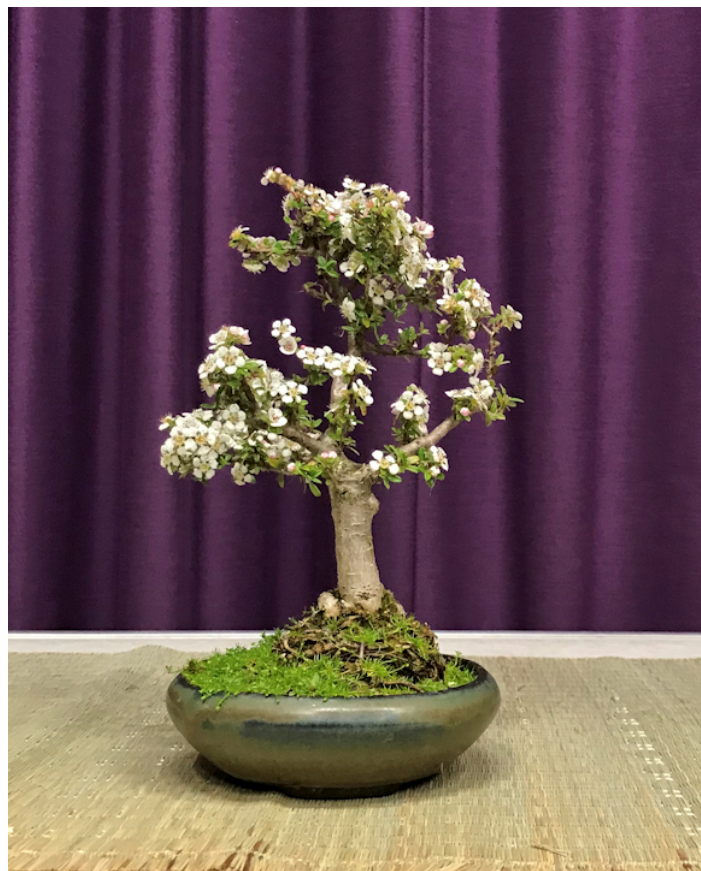
Bob's Acer Shishigashira



Richard M's Lodge Pole Pine



Clive's Larch



Paul R-Y's Cotoneaster



Zac's Cotoneaster

And the winner of the people's vote is: Zac's lovely little cascade Cotoneaster. Well done, Zac.

Click [here](#) if you would like to read the judge's comments.

After the break, John demonstrated air-layering on a large Hornbeam and a small Crab Apple.



John decides where to ring bark the trunk.

This large Hornbeam is not suitable for bonsai as it stands however the top will make a very nice "Octopus" style tree once it is air-layered. To start, John removed any shoots from the area where he will be removing bark along with any unwanted branches etc from the upper part of the tree. Next he marked out the area where he intended to remove the bark etc, using chalk.



Applying the chalk

Once the desired area is mapped out then John used a sharp blade to cut through the three layers, being careful not to damage the pale Xylem layer. Air-layering needs to be done when the sap is flowing so, once the tree is in full leaf usually early April into May. If it is done later than May then there is a risk that the roots will not have enough time to form and be able to support the tree. Air-layers should be removed in August/September, if they have enough roots as leaving them outside in the winter will risk the roots freezing and thus dying.



Cutting through the Cambium and Phloem

Once John had removed all the Cambium and Phloem around the trunk he secured the layer of clear plastic around the trunk just below the ringed area. With Ade's help he then applied the gel rooting hormone and packed the plastic with well soaked sphagnum moss.



Securing the clear plastic and adding the moss.

John then secured the clear plastic around the trunk, above the ringed area, using some wire. John then repeated the process with the black plastic. Securing the bottom with a cable tie and the top with wire.



Wrapping the black plastic around the air-layer

Having finished the Hornbeam, John moved on to a piece of material that looked more familiar to most bonsai practitioners. This was a Crab Apple, *Malus sargentii* 'Tina' that produces apples the size of Cotoneaster berries. John followed the same process as with the Hornbeam, with the exception of using a pair of ring barking cutters, to remove the layers of bark etc. These cutters work well on smaller diameter branches/trunks that are cylindrical, such as the material in the image below.



Air-layering a small Crab Apple



Moss and clear plastic secured.



Adding the black plastic layer.

Well, that's all for now. I hope you have been inspired to try some air-layering next spring. Next meeting is on the 10th June and will be a talk by Jon Burgess on inspirations from nature.

The tree of the month will be Evergreen.

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

Alistair