

SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

Bonsai Newsletter October 2026



Ade's Viburnum.

Welcome to the October meeting report.

After a sweltering summer and a whole host of I.T problems, we are back. This month we have a return visit by Amelia Williams, who gave us a talk on winter preparation and protection. Very apt for the current weather.

For those of you that have not met Amelia before, she is an arboriculturalist who spends most of her time looking after full-size trees in their natural habitat. However, since 2006 Amelia has also applied her expertise to the art of bonsai, creating a large collection of trees both indoors and out.

Amelia started off by discussing the importance of growing trees that suit your local environment. One of the major mistakes that beginners make is trying to grow species that are not suitable for their micro-climate. Ask any experienced bonsai grower, and they will admit to at least one species that they cannot grow in their garden. So, start with hardy/indigenous trees and leave the exotics till later.

Amelia explained that she built a conservatory specifically to grow her indoor bonsai as it enables her to adapt the environment to the needs of her trees. Trees that are sold as "Indoor bonsai" are not actually indoor trees, they are Tropical or Semi-tropical species that in their natural environment would be grown outdoors. However, in this country our climate is too variable to keep them outdoors all year round. Some species such as Chinese Elms, sold in their millions as indoor bonsai, can be kept indoors if you have a warm area with good air circulation and reasonable humidity. They will keep their leaves all year round and respond well to feeding. Kept outdoors all year round and they will drop their leaves in Autumn and behave like normal deciduous trees. Just be careful if you get a lot of frosts/periods of freezing as their roots don't do well if they are frozen for long periods.

Another issue that Amelia highlighted is where you place your bonsai in your garden. A lot of people design their gardens around their trees, that is to say they like certain trees in certain places and that's where they stay. Aesthetically that may work, but considering the recent hot summers we have had, but your trees may not like it. It is a bit of a faff but moving trees around so that they get light and shade at the

appropriate times will pay dividends in the end. The trees will grow at a steadier state and you will have less burnt leaves come Autumn.

Trees have a number of strategies to survive adverse weather. Some will go into a period of dormancy, something I noticed in my garden – during the hottest months most of my trees refused to put out any shoots/extensions but once the temperature dropped to 20 degrees they started to make up for lost time and produced a profusion of new growth even if it was late in the year. Other species will drop their leaves and either produce new leaves when the conditions allow or wait till spring, which can be very frustrating.



So, the first thing to consider when looking at preparing your trees for winter is their health. In order to survive their dormancy, trees need to be healthy. How do you know if your trees are healthy or not? Leaf colour and growth are good indicators of a tree's health. If your tree is not producing shoots or new leaves then there is something wrong or if the new growth looks weak, you need to investigate.

Starting with the roots, examine the tree for possible issues and treat accordingly. You may have heard it said that roots are the key to producing good bonsai and good

roots are dependant on having the right potting medium for the tree followed by correct watering and feeding. Once you have a fibrous root system that can absorb water and nutrients you have the foundations for a good tree. This year, watering has been an issue. Trying to achieve a balance between preventing root from drying out and not waterlogging them. Again, this is dependant on the kind of potting medium that you use and whether you adapt it for different species/tree requirements.

Alongside watering, feeding has had its problems. If your trees are not producing growth, then they do not need any nutrients. However, they will need them once they start to grow again. Those of us who use solid fertilisers, probably fared better as we topped up the baskets in the spring and left them to do their thing.



Next thing to consider is how you manage any fruit or flowers on your trees. This year has seen a lot of early flowering and abundant fruit on our bonsai. Producing flowers and then fruit is a huge expense for bonsai. They look nice but if you want the tree to develop then let it use its resources for growth rather than flowering. At the very least remove most of the flowers/fruit once you have enjoyed them for a few days and let the tree get back to producing shoots and leaves. You may also want to think about moving a tree to a larger pot if you have had it in a smaller show pot whilst it flowers.

Whilst on the subject of pots, Amelia explained that she had moved a lot of her bonsai into larger/deeper pots this year in order to give them more protection from the high temperatures. She also used trays filled with water to help the smaller bonsai keep hydrated. Other things she tried included using aluminium foil, wet towels and matting

to protect the pots from the sun. If you look at some of the videos from Spain and Portugal, you will see their bonsai are regularly shielded from the intense sun by these methods. The colour and glaze or lack of a glaze also makes a difference to the root temperature. Lighter colour pots reflect the heat better than darker/unglazed pots. So, perhaps we should be thinking more about the colour of our pots rather than the size.



Another aspect of winter preparation is pruning and trimming any growth that needs doing. This year has been a difficult one for developing trees. The high temperatures have sent a lot of trees into semi dormancy which has stopped any new growth being produced. No growth – no pruning! But in a "normal" year the autumn/winter is a great time to review our trees and work on that design. Deciduous trees, once they have dropped their leaves will reveal their structure and can then be pruned for their winter image. Evergreens are a bit different but you are still looking at creating ramification on each branch and encouraging taper from the trunk to the tips of each branch. Depending on the species and your environment, October may be a good time to reduce the number of buds on pines, ensuring each branch ends in two buds, to facilitate that ramification.

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



Bob's Acer Shishigashira.



Peter's Acer Deshojo.



Michael C's Pyrocantha.



Richard M's Heather.



Michael H's Cotoneaster.

And the winner of the people's vote is: Peter's Deshojo. Well done, Peter.

Click here if you would like to read the judge's comments.



If you wire your trees, and if not then why not! Then autumn is a good time to review them and remove any wires that are starting to bite in, unless that is your plan. When you wire a tree, you are damaging the structure of the cells especially if you are bending/twisting the trunk or branch. This damage can result in localised thickening which then causes the wire to bite in. With some species this can be remedied with a few more years of growth but with thin barked trees like Zelkova and Beech, once they are damaged you will need to remove the branch and start again. Another issue is the wire acting as a conductor for the cold during freezes. If you get a lot of frost or your trees are going to be left out in subzero temperatures then you might consider using a protective wrap under the wire such as hessian or raffia.



One thing that Amelia was very keen on doing, is checking the roots of her trees before they are exposed to winter. Slipping a tree out of its pot and checking the roots for any damage can help you avoid any nasty surprises in the spring. Do the roots look healthy? Are the root tips white or at least not black and crumbly and do they smell healthy. Are there any mycelium or other symbiotic funguses in the roots and if so, are they beneficial to the tree species? With smaller bonsai, you will find that they will fill up their pots much quicker than their bigger brethren.

If you have planted your smaller trees in larger pots, to support growth, you do not want them to start producing bigger root balls otherwise you will never get them back into suitable small pots. So, now is a good time to trim back the roots to fit a smaller pot, even if you are not yet ready to put them in a smaller pot.



If you are going to repot any of your trees then you need to think about the aftercare that you need to provide. Reducing the root ball is a shock to most trees and anything that you can do to reduce its effect will help with next seasons growth and development. Amelia explained that she has been experimenting with a Japanese root vitality enhancer called Menedael. Whilst it is very expensive and only available from Italy, it does seem to reduce the impact of root shock on bonsai. Dunk the tree roots in a solution of Menedael before repotting them and hopefully it will encourage quicker establishment of new roots. There are other similar products available so you may want to do some experimenting of your own, I know I will be.



Talking about different products, Amelia used to use Superthrive and now uses HB-101, which comes from Japan and is a gentle pick me up. Other options include SB plant invigorator, which I use, and good old Liquid seaweed. As with a lot of these things, the key is to try them and see what works best with your growing regime.



Other things to think about for winter preparation include, removing any remaining leaves on deciduous trees, cleaning off moss and lichens especially from the trunk, checking for pests and using a suitable wash such as Lime Sulphur to prevent any

reinfection during the cold months. Now is also a good time to clean your pots, removing any lime scale or algae and remember to check the drainage holes for roots etc.



Finally, check for pest such as mites, vine weevils, leather jackets and scale insects and treat accordingly. A good indicator of the presence of pests on a tree is sticky leaves. If your leaves feel sticky to the touch them something has been feeding on the sap and needs dealing with!

Having done all this preparation, it's now time to think about how you are going to protect your trees. This will all depend on your local environmental conditions and what you have available in the way of protection. If you have room for a suitable cold greenhouse then that is probably the best option as long as you monitor heat and water as they can quickly heat up during sunny periods. Other options are cold frames, your garage, placing pots on the ground and covering them with fleece or even straw, although this can encourage pests to overwinter in your pots. As with all aspects of bonsai, get to know your trees and their unique growing requirements as well as what they will tolerate and what they won't.



John Trott's Hornbeam, air layered back in May.

If you have read the May 2026 meeting report, you might remember that John demonstrated how to air layer on a large Hornbeam. Well five months later and the roots have grown sufficiently for John to separate the air layer from the main trunk and pot it up. The tree will be styled in the Octopus style and show what you can do with material that many would discard, if you have a bit of imagination and of course a modicum of skill.



John Trott's Larch with its underplanting of Spearmint. Looks nice and smell even better but beware it does spread!

Well, that's all for now. A big thank you to Amelia for all her insights into caring for bonsai. If you get the chance to see her talk then please do so, you won't regret it. Next meeting is on the 11th November and will be a talk by Maggie Curtis on pots. The tree of the month will be "tree and pot combination ".

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