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## SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

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Bonsai Newsletter October 2024



Michael's lovely Pyracantha.

Welcome to the October meeting report. This month we had a night of critiquing with Ade and John at the controls. Members were asked to bring along any tree that they needed help with and be open to the suggestions of the critics.



Rapt audience!



John shares his thoughts on Michael's Mugo Pine

Michael started off the evening with his Mugo Pine. Michael has had this tree since 1985 and it has been through a few different styles. Caz had a look at it when she visited us recently and Michael has been following her suggestions. However, he still feels that more can be done to improve the tree.

John's first comment was; that the branches should follow the same pattern until you reach the apex. You shouldn't have some branches pointing down and others pointing up. Some of the branches on this

tree are wired downward but there are several that are horizontal and it is these that distract from the overall image. So, what to do?

There are two options; first wait 'til the spring and bend the "offending" branches down or remove them and change the apex to reflect the "windswept" look of the lower branches. After much discussion, Michael agreed to change the front and style it as a Windswept. This required some re-wiring and the removal of a vertical branch and a smaller weak one. All that is now left to do is, wire the apex and you have a lovely shohin windswept tree. Result!



Looks much better now

## Paul's Chinese Elm

Next up was a Chinese Elm belonging to Paul. This is a standard "garden centre" bonsai, made in their millions in China and shipped worldwide as "indoor bonsai". But how do we improve it? The tree has some major scarring from the steel wire used to initially shape it. Unfortunately, the deep scars and resulting rust on the trunk are very difficult to remove and will probably be there for the rest of this tree's life. The other issue is that these are planted in Coir (Coconut fibre), a medium that does not retain nutrients very well. So, although you may be "feeding" them they are in effect starving and that along with poor watering regimes lead to their demise.



There are several ways to deal with this; if you are not going to repot the tree you will need to increase the "feeding" cycle so that the tree is able to access more nutrients. The other option and the preferred one is, to repot it into a standard bonsai medium and then place it outside. Then you can "feed" it along with your other trees and as long as it gets a bit of frost protection, it should do well.

As far as restyling the tree, it will be a matter of letting it grow profusely, to gain strength, then cutting it back to two or four leaves. Once you have sufficient branches to work with you can then style it, wire it and refine the branch structure. So, lots to do in the spring.



## Ross's Satsuki Azalea

Next up was a Satsuki Azalea belonging to new member Ross. This is one of several trees that were "gifted" to Ross and is a classic "garden centre" bonsai. But how do we improve it? John explained that like the previous tree, this is planted in Coir and has heavy scarring from wiring. The best way to look after these trees is to heavily fertilise them in the Spring with Naruko pellets. Once they start to flower, stop feeding them, let them

flower, then remove all the dead flowers and start feeding them again. Azaleas are lower dominant, so you need to prune more of the lower branches than the upper ones. This one has quite a lot of foliage in the apex so would benefit from a good pruning next Spring, making sure to leave any potential flower buds. As with the previous tree this could do with repotting. Interesting fact; if an Azalea has been imported from Japan, then it will have been grown in Kanuma (Acid loving plant soil) and will need to be repotted in Kanuma, however if it has come from China, then it will usually be potted in a neutral Ph soil, so it can be placed in normal bonsai medium with a little bit of ericaceous mix/kanuma and some chopped up Sphagnum moss.



### Stephanie's ancient Yew bonsai

This tree belongs to Stephanie and was purchased from the collection of Derek, a former customer of John's.

Unfortunately, the chap had passed away a few years ago and his wife had done her best to keep the trees alive but they had suffered from the lack of attention. The chap had been growing bonsai for over 40 years

and had some lovely collected material that had been shown at various shows in the past. The challenge now was to bring them back to their former glory.

First step is to remove all the thin dead branches. They are no good for making jins, so are redundant. Next the area of rot at the base will need to be treated with wood hardener and then some Lime Sulphur, then carved out. Once all that is done it will be a matter of feeding and encouraging back budding. Luckily Yews are very accommodating and it shouldn't take many years to build up a good density of foliage, providing it is kept in semi-shade.

### Dave's White Pine

Dave had brought along a White Pine that belongs to a friend who has been doing their best to look after it for the last 25 years. They are not into bonsai but the tree belongs to their son so they feel obliged to do something with it.

Dave has cleaned out the old needles and I helped him wire it at one of our weekend workshops. But, where to go next?



As the tree is fully wired it was a simple matter of John and Ade positioning the branches and foliage pads. One problem with the tree is that it has a large branch that is poorly positioned on the trunk but provides most of the foliage on one side. Removing it will leave a large gap but keeping it will cause unsightly thickening of the trunk.

At the moment it is being treated as a second trunk and once the tree has filled out a bit more it can be jinned. Once the wire starts to bite in the tree can be de-wired ready for refining of the foliage pads.



Starting to look like a bonsai

### Peter's Hemlock

Bought as a sapling during "Lockdown", Peter has been working to shape the trunk and build the foliage pads. He now wanted some advice on where to go next.

John's advice was to remove some of the foliage in the pads as it was starting for form "layer upon layer" of foliage. This will cause the branches to thicken and become unsightly pompoms!



Whilst John was thinning out some of the pads, Ade removed a lower branch that Peter had kept as a "sacrificial" branch. Once this was removed, the overall design of the tree was complete. All that was left to do was, building the foliage pads/apex and thickening the trunk.



Sorting out our trees for the Heathrow show.

During tea break, Ade and I sorted out our trees for the Heathrow Show and selected a few accent plants. Ade then judged the Tree of the Month from the entries below.



[Tree of the Month competition 2024 - "Autumn Colour"](#)

And the winner of the people's vote is: Michael's Pyracantha. Well done. If you would like to read the judge's comments on all the entries then [click here](#).



Bob's Trident Maple



Michael's Cascade Pyracantha



Hilly's Tanuki Juniper and Richard's Field Maple



After a brief respite it was back to critiquing for our panel and their next item was a Trident Maple belonging to Bob

### Bob's Trident Maple

This tree started life as a cutting and then spent a few years in the ground. Unfortunately, during this time it suffered die back on one side and has remained branchless on that side ever since! Bob has tried to encourage a lower branch to grow so that he can graft it into the gap but this has been unsuccessful.

John's immediate response was that he would restyle it as a Literati by removing the lower branch and rewiring the upper one to form a sparse apex. This would create an unusual but exciting bonsai in a short period of time. Otherwise, it will take another twenty years to develop the required branch structures to make it into a more classic style. Ade, on the other hand, would not do that as he admits that Literati style trees do nothing for him. Instead, he would air layer the top and encourage the lower half of the trunk to sprout and then build a canopy around the lower trunk. So, there you go Bob, even more choices for you to consider!



## Richard's Hazel

Richard had brought along a Hazel that he collected from a path where it had been run over by a tractor. This has given its trunk some character but the branches are not ramifying as they should. Hazels are not a great species for bonsai. They produce lots of suckers and leaf pruning, usually results in a new crop of leaves that are just as big as the previous ones. I know from my own experiences of collecting Hazels, in my teens and trying to make them into bonsai, it's a lot of work for little return. You can make reasonable group planting using them, but they rarely make good individual trees.

Ade's advice was to remove a large root that was hiding the lower trunk. John then suggested using a nice bit of craggy rock placed under the remaining root to turn the tree into a "root over rock" style bonsai. This would take the eye away from the upper branches and focus it on the lower trunk.



## Ross's Fig Tree

This is another of the trees gifted to Ross and the largest of them. However, Ross thinks that the tree has a few faults, including some bar branches, unsealed wounds and wire marks. Ross explained that whilst he recognises these issues, he is not sure how to remedy them.

John started by explaining that before you do any work on Figs, you need to

water them then wait half an hour. Otherwise, they will weep sap from any wounds/pruned branches. You also need to constantly prune them back to two leaves. This will encourage back budding and ramification. The ariel roots can be encouraged by placing little trays of water beneath the branches. The wire marks will be from the original styling in China and figs have very brittle branches, so care needs to be taken when wiring branches. It is better to try and develop the branch structures through pruning rather than wiring. Figs are very responsive to pruning and will back bud when pruned hard. They also require protection from frost, minimal feeding and benefit from being indoors under grow lights to prevent leaf drop.



### Stephanie's Japanese Maple "Deshojo".

Stephanie brought along a typical, "garden centre" Deshojo bonsai and simply asked "What do I do next", something many of us have asked.

John explained that these are usually grown to have as much foliage as possible, to aid selling, as leaves equal money. However, when it comes to

turning them into real bonsai most of the original branches will have to go or be cut back. Talking of cutting branches there was a lively debate on when is the best time to prune Japanese Maples; in the winter when the tree is dormant or in the spring when the tree is waking up.

Probably the best advice is experiment with trees in your own "garden micro climate" and see what works best. You can usually get cheap Japanese Maples from supermarkets to experiment on and sometimes they can turn into very nice trees.

Back to Stephanie's tree. Both John and Ade agreed that the angle of the tree needed changing. The dominant trunk is on the left side, so tilting the tree to the right will look more natural and this can be done at the next repot. Then it will be a matter of repositioning the rest of the branches, to support the new angle. Ade suggested that Stephanie remove a couple of "knuckles" that were forming on the end of some branches, as they would only get worse as time goes on.

### Ross's Monterey Pine.

We finished the night with another of Ross's trees. A young Monterey Pine that was very straight when Ross first got it, but now has some bends. But "Where to go next"? Both John and Ade have grown Monterey Pines as bonsai, however Ade's died before achieving any age so it was over to John for advice. Ross was worried that the foliage was only at the ends of the branches but John explained that this was common on this species, so you just have to incorporate it into the design, plant it into a larger pot and let it grow. Eventually it will be ready to style.



Well, that's all for now. Next meeting is on the 13th November and will be our regular, annual "Pot Night". 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".