



SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

Bonsai Newsletter April 2025



Ade's excellent specimen Larch

Welcome to the April meeting report. This month we were lucky to experience a return visit by Celtic bonsai supremo Chris Thomas, who gave us a fascinating talk on the use of Bog-wood in bonsai.

So what exactly is Bog-wood, I hear you ask? Well according to Wikipedia: Bog-wood, Bogwood, Bog wood, abonos or morta (if you are a pipe smoker),

"is a material from trees that have been buried in peat bogs and preserved from decay by the acidic and anaerobic bog conditions, sometimes for hundreds or even thousands of years. The wood is usually stained brown by Tannins dissolved in the acidic water. Bog-wood represents the early stages in the fossilisation of wood, with further stages ultimately forming jet, lignite and coal over a period of many millions of years. Bog-wood may come from any tree species naturally growing near or in bogs, including oak – bog oak", pine, yew, swamp cypress and kauri (Agathis). Bog-wood is often removed from fields and placed in clearance cairns. It is a rare form of timber that is claimed to be 'comparable to some of the world's most expensive tropical hardwoods'".



The audience getting excited at the prospect of purchasing yet more bonsai goodies

Since genuine Bog-wood is getting harder to source, we also use a variety of hard woods, as long as they are sustainably produced. Pop along to your local aquarium shop or garden centre and see what they have.



Chris takes a few moments to collect his thoughts

Chris started his demonstration by explaining why he uses bogwood for some of his plantings. Whilst the art of pot/tree selection is interesting and often complex, using a piece of bogwood or slate or other non-manufactured material to contain a tree can often free up one's artistic feelings and allows you to concentrate on the tree alone and not be bound by the "rules". There are three distinct types of bogwood planting, the first of which is using the wood as a flat/horizontal container for the tree.



First up, using Bog-wood in place of a container

This piece of wood has been selected for its ability to provide space for several trees and its interesting outer edges which will enhance the overall planting. Chris emphasised that you do not just use any old bit of wood. It has to be interesting in its own right and be big enough to hold your intended tree/s and still have room to spare.

First thing to do is prepare the wood for planting. It doesn't require any drainage holes as the shape of the wood will allow any excess water to run off. If the wood did need any drainage, then it is simple enough to drill a few holes at the lowest points. However, it will need some anchor wires to secure the trees. These are placed on the wood using short screws and then winding tie wires around the heads. Ensure that the screws do not come out of the base and that the wood is strong enough to support them. One question concerned preserving the wood. Chris replied that for genuine bogwood, you do not need any form of preservative but if you are using other wood then you can use standard wood hardener to prolong its life. For this piece of wood, Chris placed eight tie wires around the inner area.

For this planting Chris used a number of young collected Larches. These had been pre wired, to save time but not shaped. One thing to consider when planning a planting is to keep all the trees "to scale". Using trees with different size leaves will result in an unnatural looking image. If you are going to mix conifers and deciduous trees then choose ones with small leaves/needles. So, using Larches and cotoneasters would work but Larches and Beech would look wrong.



Placing your primary trees

As with all multi plantings, place your main tree first then your back one to give some depth then fill in the spaces with your secondary trees. Once they are positioned to your liking you can secure them in place and then start to shape the overall image. Remembering that each tree should not only contribute to the finished image but also look natural in their own right.



Time to set the shape and position the branches

Whilst positioning the branches, Chris explained that for these types of plantings, using your normal bonsai "soil" mix is problematic. You want the potting medium to stick to the wood and get into every nook and cranny. So, if you can, use something like Keto, the Japanese rice paddy soil that is similar to peat and supper sticky. You can make your own using the fine dust from sieved Akadama and cut up sphagnum moss in equal parts.



The finished composition, complete with moss and lichens

Once you have your trees secured, shaped and any gaps filled in with Keto, it is time to add the finishing touches. Using a variety of mosses and Lichens, Chris covers the surface to prevent the surface being washed away during watering and to enhance the look of the finished design. And there you have it, a bogwood planting resembling a low rocky outcrop with ancient Larches clinging to life.

Demo 2



Using a piece of Bog-wood as a trunk

The next use of bogwood that Chris showed us was using a vertical piece of wood as a substitute for a large trunk. Not quite "Tanuki" as you do not need to cut grooves into the wood to accommodate the live trunks. Instead, the live materials are wired and shaped so that they appear to cling to the deadwood and the base of the bogwood acts as the container for the roots rather than using a separate container. For this planting Chris used a couple of three year old Itoigawa juniper cuttings.



A three year old cutting of Itoigawa Juniper

The process of planting the trees is the same as the previous one. The trees are placed as close as possible to the "Trunk" and secured with tie wires.



Shaping the trees

Then it is a matter of shaping the individual trees to resemble the apex and branches of a single tree. You can finish by using wire, cable ties or bandages to secure the trees against the deadwood and apply moss and lichens as in the previous example.

Tree of the Month competition 2025 – Conifers

During the break, Ade judged the Tree of the Month. This month the theme was Conifers and there were a record number of entries, and a lot of Larches!



My semi cascade Larch and accent



John C's Cedar and accent planting



Bob's Juniper



Michael's Larch group



Richard M's Cryptomeria



Tony M's Larch



Geoff's Cryptomeria



Nigel's Larch



Zac's Scots Pine.



Stephanie's Larch

And the winner of the people's vote is: Michael C. Well done to you Michael.

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

Demo 2



That is a big piece of Bogwood!

After the break, Chris resumed his demonstration with the final example of Bogwood planting. Using the wood to replicate a mountain and the trees positioned as though they were hanging off the sides of the cliffs.



Imaging the trees are clinging to the sides of a mountain

For this planting, Chris used a variety of Larches, Scots Pine and Cotoneasters at different heights on the wood to replicate the different species you might find living on a mountain.

This is a genuine piece of bogwood, found in Mid Wales. It is very heavy and the wood is very hard. The preparation process is the same as before. Decide where your trees are going to be placed. Secure the tie wires and check where any excess water is going to run off. As previously, the trees are pre-wired as it will be difficult to wire them once they are secured on the bogwood. Chris explained that as this is a large piece of wood, it needs larger trees, with more character as the main trees. The two Scots Pines are placed first on the top "peaks" of the mountain, and then the two Larches are positioned in the foreground. The remaining two Cotoneasters are then used to fill in a couple of gaps at either side of the composition. Sounds simple but it took Chris almost an hour to complete this planting.



The third composition, a mountain scene with trees clinging precariously onto the rocks

And there you have it. A mountain landscape with a mixture of trees, fit for any Tokonoma or show table.

Thanks to Chris for giving us such an interesting and thoughtful demonstration. I hope it has given you some inspiration to go out and get yourself some bogwood and give it a try. Just start with smaller pieces as they are easier to carry back to the car!

Next meeting is on the 14th May and will be a workshop in preparation for our Summer Show at Willowbrook Garden Centre.

The tree of the month will be "Willowbrook show trees". And don't forget that our summer show will be on at Willowbrook Garden Centre on the 24th May till the 26th. Maybe we will see you there. Till the next time, stay safe and "keep doing bonsai".

Alistair