



SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

Bonsai Newsletter June 2025



John's award-winning Siberian Elm and Ade's award-winning accent plant

Welcome to the June meeting report. This month we had a talk on, what I think might be, one of the most debated subjects in the bonsai world. No, not whether imported trees are better than home grown! Best not to enter that minefield. No, this month we looked at the subject of "Displaying your trees, so they look their best", A.K.A "Bonsai displays at shows"!

For me, this is where the Art in bonsai happens. What do I mean? Well, I think we can all agree that a bonsai, whatever its age or stage of development will look better when it is placed on its own and viewed at eye level. Then you start to see the nebari, the flow of the trunk, the carefully positioned branches, ramification, shari and jin and you also get a sense of the tree's scale – big, small or in between. Try doing that when it is

half hidden by other plants on the bench or by your feet! It is also about telling the story of the tree. A well put together display should give you more information about where the tree would be found in nature, how it came to look the way it does and maybe give you an idea of when you are seeing it – the season etc. A good display places the bonsai in *context* and helps the viewer understand what they are looking at. Otherwise, it is just a little tree!

So, are we all agreed that a bonsai looks better on its own? I still hear some grumbles but I will ignore them. If that is true, then how about placing the bonsai on a suitable table, mat or wooden slab? If that looks better then why don't we add an accent plant or a stone/a bronze or a suitable scroll? Oh look, now we have something that looks like a bonsai being displayed at a show – nice!



A selection of accent plants from John's collection.

OK, I am being a bit flippant but if we are going to spend all this time growing our trees, do they not deserve a bit of care when we finally show them off to others? I think so.

Luckily, we have just the person in our Society to give us the low-down of displaying bonsai. Our President, John Trott, is well known in bonsai circles as a multi gold medal winner and Master Grower. He has over 90 RHS Gold medals to his name and has been involved in bonsai since 1969. He travels around the world looking at bonsai shows and gardens and has incorporated a variety of different Culture's bonsai styling into his displays. So, without further ado – over to John.

John started by explaining that when you are talking about displaying bonsai you need to differentiate between displaying individual trees in a show and creating a group display. In both cases it is no good, picking a tree from the benches and plonking it on a table and hoping for the best. Each element of the display needs to be at its best. So, what does this mean? The tree needs to be groomed, dead leaves/flowers removed, any long shoots that extend past the tree's outline need to be removed. The underneath of the foliage pads should be free from any downward pointing leaves/needles. The trunk should be clean and free from any moss, insects, cobwebs etc. The surface of the "soil" should be clean and either covered in fine layer of sifted akadama or similar material or if you are a fan of moss, you can use a variety of fine

mosses to cover most of the surface. Not all of it. Leave space around the edge of the pot and around the nebari. This is something that really needs to be done a couple of weeks before the show in order for the moss to bed in. I usually secure the moss to the surface with fine bonsai wire bent into u shaped staples. Keep the moss watered and away from birds etc. John commented that at European shows you often see trees with lots of different types of moss covering the surface in little round tussocks. John is not a fan of this style and prefers to use similar types of mosses and lichens for a more natural look. John then referred us to a tree that he had brought along, the Siberian elm that is shown at the start of this report. This tree has been prepared for a show, which will happen in a few days. John has had this tree in his workshop for the last week, under grow lights to provide uniform light for the leaves. The branches have been pruned and the trunk has been cleaned. The pot has been washed and given a polish with leaf shine and the surface has been cleaned/weeded and the moss has had anything that is not "moss" removed; insects, weeds, dead leaves etc. The final step will be placing a layer of fine Akadama around the edge of the pot, probably on the day of the show to prevent any loss during watering and transport. John explained that you can use Camelia oil on your pots but that the leaf shine helps prevent lime scale build up.



A shohin Larch and a Fern, both in contemporary style pots

John then took us through a slide show, looking at examples of individual and group displays of trees and giving us his thoughts as an RHS judge on what worked and what didn't and more importantly why. Unfortunately, I can't show you any of the images but I have found similar examples which will hopefully work.

First of all, John showed us some pictures from the recent Bonsai Live show at Telford. This year the organisers had decided to change the way that exhibitors displayed their trees by having tables that the public could walk all the way around. This caused a bit of consternation amongst exhibitors as trees often have a defined front and it is rare for a tree to be perfect all the way around. However, in hindsight it worked and the public seemed to like it. It also gave some exhibitors a chance to be creative in their displays.

One such display used a number of rectangular white boxes as stands. To John's eye, these stands were too intrusive and distracted the viewer away from the trees themselves. This led to a discussion about the use of ornate stands and pots in bonsai display. In some Japanese shows you will see trees displayed in very ornate pots or on stands that to our eyes look overpowering. And in southern China and Vietnam it is not unusual to see trees in very ornate pots and on elaborate stands. This is where culture influences the display ethic. You can have very simple, refined displays using muted pots and simple tables etc or you can have very vibrant, colourful displays and anything in between. Just be prepared to explain why you have gone down that particular route.

Next John explained the differences in two-point, three-point, five point and six-point displays and how each element had to flow into the rest of the display. Unfortunately, I don't have time to go into every aspect of these displays but you can always ask John next time you see him or do some Googling! Whilst looking at some of the images, the use of wire on a tree that is being shown was raised. John replied that this is up to the organisers; some shows do not allow wire whilst others do as long as it is unobtrusive. You should not show a tree that is heavily wired however you can, for example, use fishing line as a guy wire.

John next talked about the placement of trees within the display. All too often we see, trees crammed into a space that would look better with half the number of trees. On one hand this is understandable, as everyone wants their tree to be on display but if it can't be seen at its best then why display it all? Bonsai need space around them so when planning your display allow more, you can always add a small accent if it needs it. Don't overlap trees or stands with each other. It looks messy and distracts the flow of the display.

You will also need to think about the height of each tree and how it relates to the background. When looked at the display as a whole, it should be either lower at the sides/front and taller at the middle/back or alternate between tall and shorter trees. Alternating tall and shorter trees works well if you have lots of space and will be having more than three trees on the back row. If you look at the picture below, of our Society display at last year's Blackmore Vale show, you can see that the tallest tree is placed at the back and in the middle of the display. Smaller trees are then placed either side, one is on a taller stand to bring it up to the height of the other tree. Then two smaller trees are placed at the front and the remaining spaces are filled in with further smaller trees or accents. Unfortunately, the lens on the phone has slightly compressed the picture, making it look a bit more crowded than it was, but you get the idea. When you look at this display, your eyes should naturally travel from either side to the centre and from the front to the back. You could divide this display up into several smaller, two point or three-point displays by simply removing some of the other trees. Have a go now using your hand to block out those elements you don't think are needed. How many different displays can you make? No prizes, sorry!



Another thing to consider is the use of colour, on your trees, accents, pots, stands and the background. Unless the display is specifically designed to highlight one species or aspect of bonsai you should aim for some variety within the display. If it is all one colour, for example green, then it will be difficult for viewers to pick out much detail in the display. Add a couple of accents with brighter colours on them or have lighter or darker stands to add contrast. In the picture above, the green is broken up by the red in the leaves of the main tree, and the two accent plants. Unfortunately, you cannot see the tree on the left of the display; however this was a Trident Maple with red tinged leaves which added colour to that side of the display. Obviously, the pots should harmonise with the trees but you do need to think about how they will look in the overall display. The same considerations apply to any stands that you use. If you look again at the above display, you have from left to right – light pot/light stand, dark pot/dark stand, light pot/dark stand, light pot/dark stand etc. This breaks up the dark background and gives the viewer's eye something to stop and focus on.

If you are going to use accent plants, bronzes, stones or scrolls with your main trees, then they should link in some way to the trees. If you have a tree that is at home in the mountains then use an Alpine as an accent plant or a bronze of an eagle. You could also have a stone that resembles a mountain or a scroll of a mountain scene. For a lowland dwelling species, an accent comprising of grasses or a bronze stag would work well. A scroll with birds on it would harmonise with the rest of the elements as would a stone that looks like a hut or a rock pool. If in doubt, opt for the simple approach and don't try too hard to be innovative. We have seen in recent years, exhibitors trying to "shake up" the scene by using elements from the art world to add excitement. It rarely works and often just looks plain silly, dangling toy figures from the branches or nestling the pot on a bundle of barbed wire being two examples that spring to mind! Remember, the bonsai is the main focus and "Nobody puts baby in the corner" to quote Dirty dancing!

John finished this part of his talk by showing a couple of books that cover the art of displaying bonsai in great depth. The first is "The Beauty of Bonsai" and the second is "Bonsai Kusamono Suseki" by Willi Benz. Both of these books are difficult to find but it is worth keeping a look out on eBay/Amazon if you fancy an early birthday present.

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



Brian's Cryptomeria Forest



Bob's Juniper



Richard 's White pine



John C's Scots pine



Peter's Larch



Tony's Mugo Pine



Richard M's Western Hemlock



Nigel's Eastern Hemlock



A Mystery Podocarpus!

And the winner of the people's vote is: Nigel's Hemlock. Well done, Nigel. Click here if you would like to read the judge's comments. [here](#).



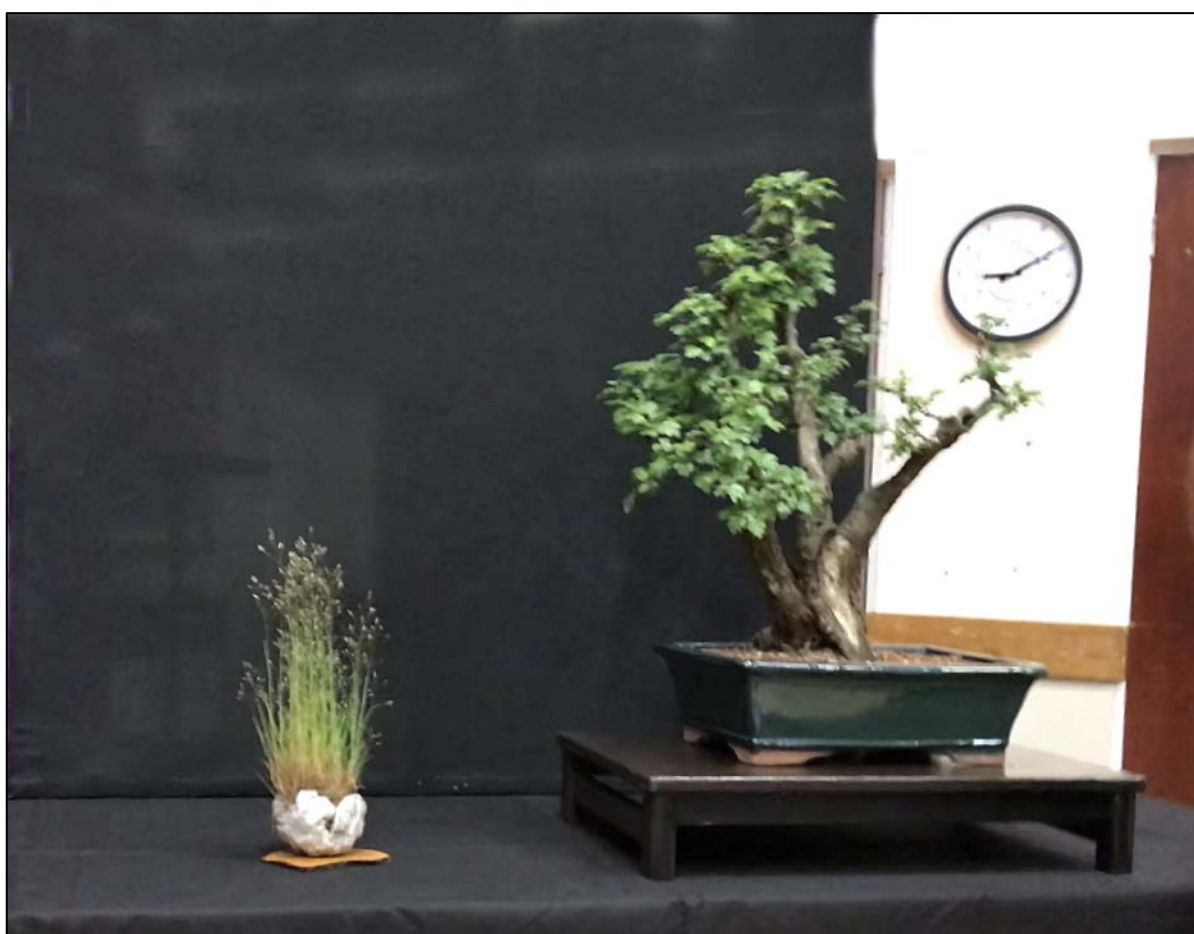
To finish off the evening John selected a few of the trees that members had brought along and demonstrated how they could be displayed in a two point display using suitable accents, table etc.



A Hawthorn belonging to Bob

The first thing to consider when creating a display is the direction of the main tree. John explained that you need to establish which side is the leading side and then place the tree so that it leads the eye into the display. Bob's Hawthorn leans to the left, so John placed it on the right of the display area. Next consider what sort of table would suit this tree. Unfortunately, unless you have access to dozens of bonsai display tables this is always going to be a compromise however in this case the tree is stocky and the pot is large so a similarly robust table in a dark colour will work. Another tip John imparted about tables is to put felt pads on the pot feet when displaying them on tables, unless you enjoy re-varnishing tables after every show!

Right, where do Hawthorns grow? Hedges and open moorland. So, what plants might you find in those locations? Ferns, grasses and low growing flowering plants. Let's try an accent plant made of grasses in a light pot.



The finished display

John explained that you could have used a flowering accent plant with similar colour flowers to the Hawthorn. This would remind the viewer that this is a flowering tree or you could use a scroll of flowers to do the same. If the tree is in flower, then try not to use a flowering accent plant as that could take away the focus from the main tree.



Peter's Metasequoia and delicate accent plant

Peter brought along his lovely Metasequoia, accompanied by a very nice little accent and a custom made table. John decided that the tree would sit better on the left of the display so the accent was moved to the right. The table and the slab on which the accent was placed matched each other and worked well with the accent pot however the table would look better if it was a bit darker. Remember the thing about adding contrast to your display. The accent was nice but this display would look better with a smaller/lower accent. Generally, the accent should not be taller than the rim of the pot when placed on the table.



A simple switch around and there you have it!

Talking about the placement of the accent, a simple way of deciding where to place it is to imagine a line running down the side of the foliage facing the accent. Extend it until it reached the surface of the table and there you have the optimum position for your accent/stone/bronze. If you want, you can bring the accent forward so that it is in front of the table, rather than in line with it.



Brian's Cotoneaster

This is an interesting tree to display. Does it flow to the left or the right? After some thought, John decided that this tree flows to the right, so the accent needs to be placed on the right. What do you think about the stand? It is a lovely stand however it looks a bit overpowering for this tree/pot. A darker stand would look better, so John chose a low black table with scroll ends to complement the pot. You could also use a taller stand that is a similar width to the pot or a flat Jitta/bamboo mat that is the same length as the height of the tree/pot. One other idea was to use a longer jitta and place the accent on it, linking the tree and accent into one display.



The finished display, simple and understated

To complete the display, John selected a similar but smaller black table to place the accent plant on.



Nigel's Eastern Hemlock and Oak beams

First suggestion from John was "if you are going to use blocks like that, then either use them singly or place them asymmetrically". To accompany this tree, you will need a chunky accent and stand. A delicate accent or stand would be overshadowed by the visual weight of the tree and blocks. So, John chose a Fern in a modern pot and placed it on a thick wooden slab with a natural edge, to complement the Elm blocks.



The finished display



John C's Cotoneaster

Next up for discussion was a Cotoneaster, on a wooden slab and accompanied by a Chinese Money plant accent. The accent was very nice but too big for the display so John replaced it with a small stone on a carved stand. Next John tried turning the wooden slab over, as both the tree and the slab were flowing in the same direction. After some reflection, John decided to replace the slab with a low table. As you can see in the picture below, the composition is now much more harmonious.



Again, a simple composition but it looks right.



Jon's Cotoneaster

Last but by no means least, another Cotoneaster belonging to Jon and displayed in one of his excellent pots. First impressions from John were that the tree needs to be repositioned in the pot to emphasise some of the branch structure which is currently hidden at the back. This is a low growing plant found in rocky terrain so after several tries; John paired it with a low stone that resembles a rocky outcrop.



The final composition - or is it?

One last comment from John concerned the lower branch on the left hand side. John felt that the tree would look better if the lower branch was removed. To illustrate this, he placed a sheet of paper over the offending branch and "Hey presto" looks better already. Well, something to think about after the re-potting etc.



Will Jon cut off this branch and get some more accent plants?
We will have to wait and see!

Well, that's all for now. I hope you have found this interesting and informative and I look forward to seeing more of our member's trees displayed with these points in mind.

Next meeting is on the 9th July and will be a summer workshop and Bring & Buy sale, so lots of shoot trimming and a chance to pick up the odd bonsai bargain.

The tree of the month will be back, with "Summer foliage" as the topic.

Till the next time, staysafe and "keep doing bonsai".

Alistair