u3a Barnstaple | Bonsai Group

It is not surprising that the sales of the yummy cakes and drinks offered by Ali and Tony the owners Venn Valley Vineyard (between Landkey and Swimbridge) EX32 0NN, have increased over the last few months!

Our next bonsai meeting will be on **Wednesday, 1 November** at the vineyard, at 2:00 pm. I was asked a little time ago to discuss the merits of big bonsai so this is the one!

It has become a welcome tradition of this group that people bring along trees to discuss, with the view to developing them into a decent bonsai.

This rather agreeable Fig was brought in showing some splendid features. It has a classically rotating trunk and an interesting branch arrangement. This type of fig (Ficus benjamina) – sometimes called the weeping fig - is the type often found neglected in a corner of an office gasping for water; this fig will never have the lovely pointy fruit that can be eaten but has lovely dark shiny leaves.

This type of Fig likes the soil gently moist, but never soggy, water when the top two inches of soil is dry. Somewhere bright but away from direct sun is ideal. If the leaves drop, probably needs more light is needed. Figs love moist air and absorb a lot of water through its leaves. Frequent misting will keep that greenery healthy.

Pruning Ficus benjamina encourages the tree to grow new shoots, so regular pruning is essential especially as this tree grows quickly. In order to maintain shape, cut new growth back to the first two leaves after they have grown 5 or 6 leaves. Beware of the sap which is milky white and sticky and could be irritating to some skin. Clean your scissors after pruning your Fig

The Fig relies heavily on the nutrients you provide in your fertilizer. The nutrients in the soil will wash away quickly and must be reapplied through a good fertilizer. This species prefers a weekly feeding of balanced fertilizer, slowed down to every other week through the winter.

I put my two Figs outside from May to September, and bring them in for the rest of the year.

Maggie brought in this Privet. It is clearly an elderly specimen given the thickness of the trunk which has been cut about 20 cms up removing the rest of the tree. This has promoted much young growth.

A further interesting point is that the tree is growing in a garden pond basket. Pond baskets allow for aeration of the roots, combined with the right "soil" to keep the root mass just moist enough. As the roots grow outward towards the edge of the basket, the light coming through the basket essentially air-prunes the roots that causes ramification and a denser root mass. This is ideal for bonsai as your goal is essentially to get as many fine feeder roots into a smaller pot to maintain water/nutrient uptake without the need for the usual fat tap roots.

There are many stylistic options with this tree as it is healthy and producing strong side branches, capable of being trained in many directions. Should be fed, watered and left to grow on so the correct option can be sought.

One of our regular members Austin asked if we could take a look at larger trees which we did with the assistance of four of mine.

Chamaecyparis Boulevard

This 20 year old tree was grown from a cutting and then planted in the open ground (next door's garden actually) and grew wonderfully; particularly the nebari. The taper of the trunk from soil to top is rather splendid.

Technical bit coming up:
All Chamaecyparis and indeed junipers use 'apical dominance'. This is controlled by hormone levels in different parts of the outermost growing stems of the tree. These hormones, known as Auxins, play a major role in a tree's response to pruning. The higher concentrations of Auxins closest to the tip tend to suppress the opening of buds below. This is the apical dominance and serves a valuable purpose in promoting the growth of the shoot tip
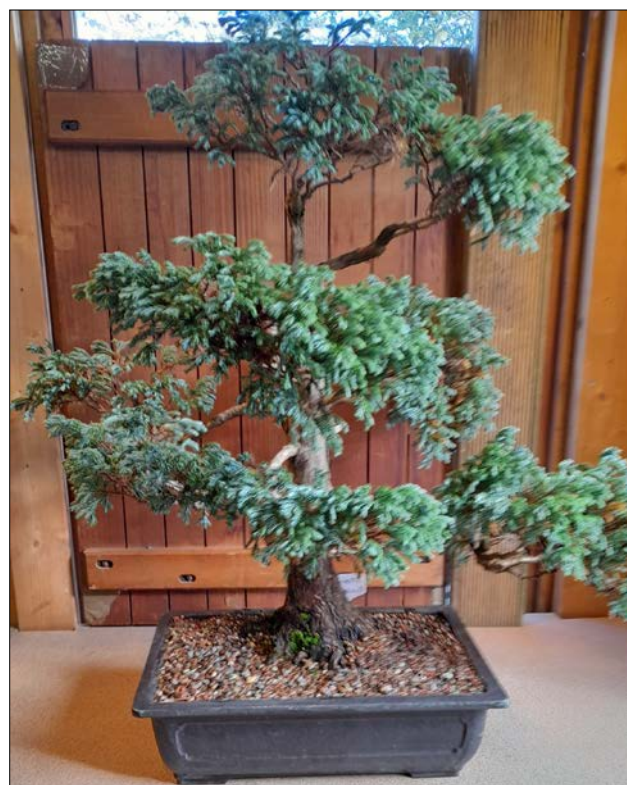
at the expense of the growing points located lower down the stem. If a tree is competing for sunlight with its neighbours, it is much better to have a few strong shoots reaching for the sky than a thousand shoots competing for limited nutritional resources within the plant.

The result for the bonsai artist is that the growth is always outward, often leaving dead growth behind. The solution is to prune back hard and wire the branches into fans in preparation for future growth to create the satisfying domes that we try to create. This Boulevard was trimmed back hard four months ago. The new fresh growth is now showing the beautiful greeny-blue for which this species is famed.

Juniper, Blue Alp

This juniper has the same growth properties as the Boulevard in that it also 'apical dominant'. The major difference being that this tree really hurts your hands when working on it! Very spiky!

The image to the left shows the growth and the one on the right shows the tree partly thinned out at the Somerset Bonsai Society workshop in September.

Hornbeam

A classic formal upright tree. Further development is needed on the left hand side on the upper half to gain the ideal triangular outline. The branches all need greater *ramification* to bulk them up somewhat to put the 60cm (2 foot) tree into the correct perspective. A good feeding regime will help boost the growth next year.

The final tree in this large quartet is a Juniper horizontalis. It was bought at St John's in around 1984 for about £8.00. It was dug up in 2011 with a view to making a bonsai of it. The image below was taken in September 2017. It just goes to show that in 6 year,s using rather unpromising material an almost show level bonsai can be made.

The Juniper being shown at the October meeting

Our next meeting is on 1 November at the usual venue of Venn Valley Vineyard @ 2:00pm.

Please bring along any tree that we could discuss as a group; this process gives a broader insight to possibilities across a wider range of material and is also a lot of fun of course.

Further details of bonsai help can be found at
www.bonsaiforeveryone.com

Any queries or help needed please email or phone me:

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