

Winter 2019



SA Bonsai Newsletter

President's Report

Matt Sharp

Brrrr! It's cold outside. Winter has finally arrived and brought some much needed rain and both my bonsai and their associated weeds are looking grateful, so hopefully yours are as well.

Last month I particularly enjoyed Tony Bebb's visit and I loved hearing him discuss the Literati style. It's a style that can be hard to define and even harder to pull off successfully but he managed to do both in his relaxed manner and I always enjoy watching him work.

Coming up in late June we have Andrew Sellman coming over from the Sunshine Coast. You can see his work on his youtube channel and I'm especially looking forward to seeing him work on junipers. His work speaks for itself and we have some nice material lined up for his demonstration. We'll soon be open bookings for Andrew's workshops and I really urge you to participate. If you've never been to one of our visiting tutor workshops then consider coming along, even as an observer. They're great fun and I guarantee you'll learn something new.

A few weeks ago I was lucky enough to attend the *2019 National Bonsai Convention* in Melbourne where the focus was on native Australian species, and I came away fully inspired and a head full of ideas. The relatively new Victorian Native Bonsai Club (VNBC) put on a very professional show and the exhibition showcased some exceptional trees. Ryan Neal, the keynote speaker from the USA, occasionally shared the stage with Hugh Grant, who was one of our visiting tutors last year. You can read a full description of the conference in the article written by Alan Jabs so I won't repeat it here, but it's got me thinking about what we might have growing here in Adelaide. I've had a consistent nagging feeling that somewhere out here there is a hidden gem waiting for us to find and we could bring something uniquely South Australian to the bonsai world, and we've probably been trampling over it to get to the Olives and Ashes that we usually target (although don't get me wrong, I love Olives and Ash!). We could take the lead from our own Chris Drinkwater, who had a close look at an unexceptional landscaping bush growing in the northern suburbs and saw what was possible, and with his skills as a Bonsai artist turned the *Eriocephalus africanus* into one of our most sought after species.

There are a few caveats of course. We can't take native species from the parks and reserves where we get permission to hold our digs, and if there is some private land we might get access to we have to consider the ethics of digging native trees that might already be under threat. As an example I was looking into trees and shrubs that grow locally to the Adelaide hills and was interested in a *Baeckea behrii* that had real potential until I noticed it was flagged as "threatened in that particular region", so I put a line through that one. Tubestock would be an option though.

At the convention Ryan Neal spoke at length about the challenges (and exhilaration) of identifying native species and learning the techniques of growing them as bonsai, and the chance to contribute something new. His advice was to learn the growth characteristics and biology of potential species and study carefully the way they look in the wild so we can style them in a way that is sympathetic to their nature. He was surprised by how fast our natives grow and stated we need to find a way to constrain the growth so our designs don't constantly need reworking.

Lots to think about. And I haven't even touched on the topic of an Australian style!

See you at the next meeting.

Tony Bebb and the literati style

The highlight of the visit by international demonstrator, Tony Bebb, was his presentation at the May meeting on literati style penjing which he admits, is his favourite.

Tony explained that from the time he was 19 years old he frequently heard comments such as 'if all else fails, try a literati' and this became the incentive to properly explore the style as such comments made little sense to him.

This led to an in-depth exploration through books about Chinese culture to discover that the style evolved from the the literati scholars – the well-educated class of civil servants who influenced Chinese society, culture and politics. These men frequently retired to the mountains for the pleasure of contemplation and to practice painting. These paintings embody the philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and

capture the spiritual essence of the landscape rather than the realism with which we are so familiar. It is from this practice that the literati style of penjing emerged – elongated trunks with few branches and an emphasis on simplicity and elegance.

Tony urged us to seek out Issue 3 of a 1997 edition of *Bonsai Focus* which contains an article by a Japanese critic who writes about the literati style drawing in the viewer to interpret what they see and that each will *feel* something different as they consider the graceful tree before them.

As the style is simple but expressive, Tony insisted that literati require an equally simple, round pot preferably with a flared rim and without glaze, although some texture is acceptable. He added that the tree is generally placed in the middle of the pot unless the angle/lean of the tree and main branch require it to be set further back for better balance.

The demonstration



Tony contemplates the tree, makes the first cuts and cleans in preparation for wiring.

The trunk of a literati is expected to appear aged but it must also be slender and not overly thick at the base, so for these reasons Tony explained that he was pleased with the black pine made available for the demonstration as it embodied these features.

Generally speaking, he considers pine, conifer and junipers have the most potential for literati because it is a mountain style and these are mountain trees. The

graceful nature of red pine makes this tree particularly desirable.

As he worked Tony made the following points.

- Soil composition for pines and junipers should be free draining as these plants have originated from drier conditions and evolved needles instead of broad leaves to inhibit moisture loss.
- It is recommended to wire under the branch first and if the branch is to be twisted, to wind the wire in the same direction as the twist direction so that the branch doesn't rotate within the wire.
- Always make the notch on top of a branch if a severe bend is required. Never notch underneath as this will interrupt sap flow and kill the branch.
- Old trees have a broad, rounded apex like an umbrella and this can't be achieved by constant tip pruning. Instead, branching needs to be developed to provide the 'umbrella' structure.
- The point above also applies to developing branch pads elsewhere on a tree. Pads need structure by ensuring that secondary shoots are allowed to develop into secondary branches before pruning.



The final result of the demonstration and first stage for this literati. If a more in-depth look at literati is required, the club library has an excellent book: *Literati Style Penjing – Chinese Bonsai Masterworks* by Zhao Qingquan.

How are 'demo' trees sourced?

This question was raised by several members at the May meeting. Some are club trees that are looked after by various club members, often for years. After the demonstration they are taken back and cared for to make sure they continue to be healthy before they are eventually raffled or auctioned off. The other trees used for demonstrations belong to club members who donate the tree at their own risk, both in terms of the health and styling of the tree. The tree returns to them and hopefully it survives the work and the owner approves of the new style.

Reflections on the weekend workshops

Rod Colbert

When I received the email giving dates for Tony's workshops I booked in straight away as I was fortunate enough to experience his demonstration at the club monthly meetings previously and felt personal tuition for \$10.00 an hour would be more than worth the money – after all that is not exactly expensive these days.

I spent a considerable time going through my stock of trees trying to identify what I thought might be worthy of his attention and after almost three weeks I had whittled it down to three candidates, a Halsey Road Fig and two Olives.

One of the Olives puzzled me. I had no idea what style would suit it and had in fact looked at putting it in the green bin a couple of times. It had a very interesting nebari, two trunks of sorts, some possible jin material and a few extra branches, but I couldn't go from there. So it was taken along more in hope than expecting to finish with anything like a Bonsai. Welcome the Master!



Now before I go any further I would like to give a small piece of advice... TAKE A PHOTO BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME FOR THE WORKSHOP... I didn't as my expectation was extremely low and now I only have my own memory to appreciate where the tree started.

While we participants were feeding our faces at lunch, Tony did a quick look around the trees of the six participants so when he got to me he was prepared, I was not. Firstly he put the tree up on wedges to change the angle and then he explained the removal and repositioning of branches and what I could do with the jin material. I was then into wiring and trimming branches. A very interesting comment he made was to look through all the leaves and see the branches when designing, I understood but think it will need some serious training on my part to perfect it.

Any way, after three and a bit hours I had finished up with a tree that I am super impressed with and glad now I didn't throw it in the bin. I now have to wait until spring to repot it at the angle which is needed and this will require a fairly serious trimming of the root ball. CAN'T WAIT... COME ON SPRING!

Terry Bertozzi

The recent Tony Bebb workshop was the fourth I have attended since joining the society and my third as a participant (once as an observer).

Given Tony is an internationally recognised tutor, I was both excited about what I might learn from him but also a little nervous. However, my fears were quickly dispelled after meeting him. Tony was exceptionally friendly and had an easy-going teaching style that I really liked.

The tree I selected to work on with Tony's guidance was a lilly pilly that started life as a pot plant. I had taken the same tree to a previous workshop where I was helped with setting the basic framework. I continued to work on the tree at home but was unsure what to do with some of the branches. I knew I had too many but I couldn't decide which to remove and I had two conflicting ideas on how the apex should look. Tony discussed the tree with me and then made suggestions on which branches could either be removed or re-positioned, while explaining the reasons for his decisions.

This is the main benefit I get from attending workshops – hearing the thought process of more experienced practitioners that either teaches me something new or challenges my current ideas and skills. This will likely be the first tree I put into a bonsai pot and I certainly would not have got this far without the help of these society workshops.

If you are new to the society or bonsai, or not quite sure about how workshops are run, why not participate as an observer. You will get the benefit of hearing the demonstrator's comments on all the trees and depending on the demonstrator, be able to ask questions as well. You also get a chance to see what other members are working on and talk to them about their trees.

Another opportunity to pick up information and tips.

Private workshops

Visiting demonstrators will also undertake private workshops for a fee and this was also part of Tony's work while in SA.

Malcolm Jenkins took advantage of this opportunity and his reflection follows.

So why is a private session with Tony Bebb any different to doing a normal workshop with Tony Bebb? Let me share my experience of having Tony at my home for 4 hours.

Tony firstly asked what I wanted to do so my tip is 'be prepared'. Rather than creating an 'instant bonsai', my first priority was to get Tony to critique the bonsai collection (that is the plants that I have so far managed to get in a bonsai pot). I really wanted to know whether I was heading in the right direction or otherwise. We started with the pen and paper, writing down the plethora of information that Tony was imparting as we moved around the

collection. After the second tree I was suffering writer's cramp and Tony was suffering from pent up bonsai enthusiasm so we decided to get stuck in as we proceeded through the collection. If a branch needed to be removed or wired and moved then that task was executed. If the critique revealed that a general thinning or clean-up was required then I made a note so that this could be worked on at a later time.

One of the greatest benefits in having Tony look at my whole collection was that he was able to detect a general theme where I was going off track. In my eagerness to create ramification I had been cutting back too early and hence the foliage pads were looking very congested (particularly with the olives). Judicious pruning was recommended to declutter and then allow the new shoots to grow out longer. In this way the branch structure remains visible with the main foliage density occurring at the outer margins of the pad.

As members of the SA Bonsai Society we get a wonderful opportunity to learn from some very talented bonsai artists. When the opportunity presents itself I would highly recommend as a minimum, doing a workshop on a single tree of your choosing, and as a treat, spending a ½ day or a whole day with a visiting demonstrator at your home to enhance the evolution of your trees.

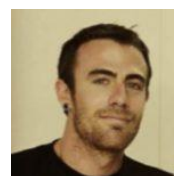
Visiting demonstrator Andrew Sellman is coming ...

Don't miss this opportunity to advance your bonsai skills available on the weekend of **29-30 June**.

The cost for participating in a half day work shop is \$30 (max. 8 participants) .

Andrew's fees for private work are \$45 per hour although he reduces this to \$40 an hour for half or full day sessions.

Secure your spot by attending the June workshop or email secretary.sabonsai@gmail.com



AABC 32nd National Bonsai Convention – May 17-20th

By all accounts this convention with its focus on Australian native trees, proved very successful as those who attended from SA came back positively buzzing with stories and images to show. The [Victorian Native Bonsai Club](#) will shortly have their gallery updated with images from the exhibition.



Breaking through the Bonsai ceiling with Ryan Neil

Malcolm Jenkins

Ryan opened his first session by addressing the burning issue that had been floating around the Australian Bonsai community namely, "why are we getting an international demonstrator to inform us about Australian native plants?" He quickly gave the audience the utmost confidence in his ability by explaining that his demonstration was focussed on exploring the possible learning techniques that may be employed whilst working with our natives and as such there were no pre-existing experts in this field. As a teacher, Ryan excelled in the depth of knowledge he imparted, both with horticulture and bonsai styling, and he offered the audience a practical methodology for learning about all plants rather than a definitive explanation of what to do with a particular species.

A wonderful experiment he conducted in front of us was to wrap an offcut piece of *Kunzea ambigua* (tick bush) in some wet paper towels. At the same time he wrapped the demonstration *Kunzea ambigua* with the wet towels in the area which he intended to bend at a later time. Ryan speculated that the *Kunzea* was similar in nature to one of the North American native species and his belief was that the dry fibrous nature of the *Kunzea* would absorb the moisture like a sponge and thereby become more pliable for bending. After 2hrs he cut the sample piece of *Kunzea* and showed us the cross section which revealed that the timber had indeed absorbed the moisture. The bending of the demonstration plant was then executed successfully.

In his approach to styling a couple of tips he imparted:

1. Tilt the planting angle of a tree to remove perpendicular or horizontal lines in the design. Beware that in tilting the tree that other problems of this kind are not created in more important areas of the tree.
2. When looking at a developed tree explore the evolution i.e where is the tree going next. Does the tree need to have age developed perhaps by creating smaller more sparse foliage pads or the incorporation of more dead wood?

In summary, if you get the chance to see Ryan Neil I would highly recommend you do it. He will be in Canberra for the World Bonsai Masters in August 2019.

Meeting Venue

Goodwood Community Centre
Rosa St
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