

# Sussex Bonsai Group

## Spring Newsletter



APRIL 2010

*www.sussexbonsaigroup.co.uk*

### *Chairman's Comments*

Doesn't time fly when you're having fun? It's spring already and time for the first Club Newsletter of 2010.

Following what seems to be a never ending winter I'm guessing most of you are busy re-potting all your trees into suitably free draining composts in readiness for another gloriously wet and windy English summer.

This really is a wonderful time of year, the buds are swelling fast on my bonsai, the fuji cherry in my garden is in glorious flower and the bluebells are popping up everywhere. And although re-potting can sometimes be a chore, (especially if you have lots of trees to do), it does give us the chance to look carefully over our trees and form a plan of action for the coming year.

As I study my bonsai I always write down my ideas, just in case I forget them later on, or the design problems I notice are hidden by the summer foliage. The plan I make for the year, stays in my toolbox and can be checked if needed at workshops or whenever I'm working on that particular tree.

This time of year is also perfect for collecting trees from the wild. If you have never done this, please read the next article on this newsletter.

Most of the text was written by Will Heath, and is taken from an article found on [www.knowledgeofbonsai.org](http://www.knowledgeofbonsai.org). If you haven't already done so, take the time to check out this site and read some of the articles posted there. It really does contain a wealth of interesting information for bonsai enthusiasts.

The first two club meetings of 2010 were a great success. The February re-potting workshop is always a popular evening, with help and advice on hand for those who needed it, and the March demo on saikei by Dave Penny was fascinating and exceptionally well attended.

I hope it inspired you all to design a saikei landscape yourselves, as it would be great to see more of this art form at club displays and shows.

Please don't forget that at the November club meeting we will be having a bonsai auction, so if you have just too many trees to cope with, or like me, you have trees you've given up on, these can be entered into the auction, along with any un-wanted pots, tools or bonsai books.

Hopefully you will enjoy reading this spring edition of the Club Newsletter, finding the articles interesting and informative. My thanks go out to Ginette for her sterling editorial work on the PDF, and to Glenda for distributing it to the membership.

Hopefully see you all at the next Club meeting,

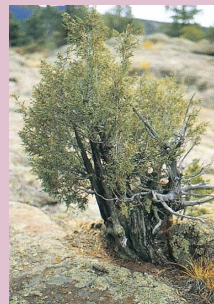
*Andrew Ford (Club Chairman)*

All those who collect plants for bonsai should observe the ethical considerations of collecting because the manner in which we collect affects the perception of collectors worldwide. Unethical collecting can give a bad name to bonsai enthusiasts everywhere and can make it very difficult for others to acquire permission to collect in the future. The following are some considerations that I personally abide by.

- Always obtain permission from the landowner before you collect. Every single piece of land belongs to someone, be it a roadside, construction lot, field, woods, abandoned house, or farm.
- Collecting anything that you do not own and/or do not have permission to is stealing.
- Never take the only tree of its kind in the area.
- Never collect a tree that you are not sure has a very good chance of survival. Experience can tell if a tree can be successfully collected or not.
- Only collect what you will use.
- Always fill in your holes and remove any and all signs that you were there.
- Do not leave your garbage behind and always pack out other garbage that you may find. The key here is to leave the site better than you found it.

Over the years I have refined the tools I take down to the base minimum and as I sometimes have to walk a ways to where I will be collecting, this helps lighten my load and save my back. The following is a list of tools and supplies I carry in my backpack when collecting in the wild.

- Short shovel which I keep a good sharp edge on. Folding Shovels break easy, I don't use them.
- Long handled and short handled pruners.
- A good sharp knife.
- A small hand saw.
- A few plastic bags for smaller trees.
- A mesh laundry bag for collecting sphagnum moss.
- A few seedlings of the species I will be collecting.
- Snacks, water, a lighter, and a good first aid kit.



Collecting on the spot requires that you get as much as the root ball as possible to assure survival. The soil conditions in the spot you collect will dictate if spot collecting can be done. Some places you will find create naturally tight root balls close to the trunk, others the roots may go on for yards with no feeder roots close to the trunk. The latter trees should be left alone.

When you must collect a tree on the spot great care must be taken to retain as much of the root ball as possible. Trenching completely around the tree and then undercutting the root ball is a far better way than to angle the shovel in and pry. In this way the root ball is less disturbed and the trees chances of survival is much greater. Waiting until after a good rainfall will help to assure that a good soil mass will be lifted with the root ball or wetting the root ball prior to digging will help the soil to remain in place.

### **After Care**

Once you have collected the tree or trees you wanted, be sure to keep the root ball damp, never allow it to dry out. I use my judgment, depending on the overall health of the tree and the root mass to determine if it will go into a training pot, growing box, or straight into the growing bed. I never style a collected tree until one or two full seasons has passed and the tree shows significant signs of healthy growth. I will however prune back to encourage back budding if the health of the tree will allow it.

Akadama, Turface and Seramis are among the most popular high quality (inorganic) soil components available in which to plant your bonsai. Unfortunately, they can be difficult to source and are expensive, particularly if you have many large trees to re-pot, have to buy by mail order or just require a small quantity for a small number of trees.

These soil components are all (basically) clay granules that have been fired/heated to create small pellets or granules that are water retentive, extremely well draining and are stable, that is, they will not breakdown over the course of the year.

**Some** cat litter products are exactly this; fired clay granules and this year I have decided to repot many of my trees, including several specimens into Kittydama (as it has fondly become known) for several reasons;

Being a working and busy family man, I use an automatic watering system to water my trees each night. The problem with this is some trees planted in a peat/grit soil mix tend not to dry out between watering cycles, and I've noticed a lack of vigour in these trees this year, compared to those already potted in Akadama.

My collection has nearly doubled this year and I simply cannot afford the amount of Akadama needed to re-pot all my trees. At approximately £2.50 for a 10litre bag, Kittydama just makes economical sense to me.

I have noticed that the cat litter does in fact contain harder particles than Akadama. You can test this yourself by trying to crush several grains between your fingers. I'm sure that the cat litter will take longer to break down in the pot, keeping air and water movement through the soil to a maximum, which will be obviously beneficial to the tree.



The type of cat litter used is very important. Some contain a clumping agent that defeats the object of having a free draining compost.

Some are also perfumed, though this seems to dissipate after watering and has no ill effect on the trees.

My chosen brand is Tesco's low dust lightweight, which after some research online appears to be the Kittydama of choice amongst bonsai enthusiasts. (see photographs) This has a light perfume and a pinkish tinge compared to Akadama but still looks natural in the pot.



At the moment, I have only planted medium or large sized trees in cat litter, as I want to see how well it holds water during the summer months before using it on any of my shohin. The last thing I want is for the pots to completely dry out whilst I'm at work. It may be that a mix of cat litter and a coarse humus based compost will work best for small sized trees.

I will of course also need to rethink my feeding regime, as an inorganic soil will hold fewer nutrients within its particles than an organic. Though this is not necessarily a bad thing. It may mean I can use my usual slow release pellet fertiliser and still use a foliar feed every two weeks without fear of root burn etc, as the excess fertiliser will leach through the soil.

I'm sure you will see some of these newly potted trees at club meetings or shows, But I will also write an update in the autumn edition of the newsletter to let you know how they are progressing, and if the change to 100% cat litter has any disadvantages.

Having moved six months ago from inner Brighton to the relatively leafy suburbs of Sompting, I can report that something strange appears to be happening to my bonsai collection.

Lichens of various types and colours are building up extremely fast on the trunks and branches of nearly all my trees. I have never had a problem like this before in all the year I've been collecting bonsai (see photograph below).

The phenomenon may be due to global warming or more probably due to the cleaner air in my new local area.

Lichens have long been known to flourish in clean air, and have been used for many years by environment agencies as an indicator of pollution levels within inner city and suburban areas.

Though obviously I'm happy if this is the case, but I just wish the stuff was easier to clean off my trees. I spent the best part of three hours scratching the lichens off a cotoneaster semi-cascade yesterday!

If anybody out there has found an easier way of dealing with lichens, please let me know.



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### ***DATES FOR YOUR DIARY***

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17th/18th April - SHOW at SOUTH DOWNS GARDEN CENTRE, HASSOCKS

28th April - GENERAL WORKSHOP (please bring your trees along - help is always on hand)

8th May - Display at PLUMPTON AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE, which was a huge success last year

Please support your Club's shows and events. Any help would be much appreciated.