



Naturally Inspired – a Report on a ‘wow!’ Weekend

By Roger Hnatiuk

What a stimulus-packed weekend of bonsai for experimentalists and traditionalists alike.

This was the 3rd Symposium on Australian Plants as Bonsai, held in conjunction with the 10th National Exhibition of Australian Plants as Bonsai.

The Exhibition displayed many trees that easily fit the ‘mature’ bonsai description. How much things have changed in the 11 years since the 1st Exhibition. The mastery of concept and horticulture have clearly grown in the intervening years. Bonsai artists have moved both in the direction of using Australian species with traditional styling

intentions and mannerisms, as well as branching out to embrace their views of what Australian trees look and feel like.



Figure 2. *Acacia pravissima*, ‘Golden Carpet’, 3rd in People’s Choice award; by Peter Hanrahan.

The coastal tea tree, in Figure 1, shows superb mastery of the horticultural possibilities of this species: attention to detail of leaf masses and placements, branch ramification, trunk-form, including the signs of agedness in the trunk, where muscling sinews have begun to



Figure 1. *Leptospermum laevigatum*, coastal tea tree, 1st in People’s Choice award; by Grant Bowie.

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bulge and snake up the trunk to entice the viewer to look closely at all the details as well as enjoy the form. The form feels strongly influenced by 20th century Japanese aesthetics and the tree could robustly compete in any of the major shows in that country. The continuity between tree style and the elegantly simple traditional pot and stand, produced a piece that charmed many viewers.

The delightfully cascading *Acacia* 'Golden Carpet' (Figure 2), demonstrates how to effectively capture the excited busyness of those squiggly trunks by contrasting them with the strong drooping branches of this wonderful acacia cultivar. While it was already preparing its buds for an explosion of perfumed, brilliant-yellow spring flowers, the young inflorescences cast an autumnal haze of pale old rose around the descending branches and leaves. The tall pot and complex lines of the stand appear to hark from an Asian aesthetic, which in this combination works quite well. It plays with ones sensibilities like yin and yang. A real sight to see and enjoy.

I also particularly enjoyed this most unusual presentation of a fig (Figure 3). This setting of tall, elegant trunks, contrasting with the very short, stubby accent fig, captured my imagination. Not many of the viewers on the weekend seemed to appreciate it. It was tucked away in one corner of the exhibition, where the lighting was not all that good and you couldn't stand back from it in the tight space. But for those who took the time to let this work into their minds eye, a very impressive early stage tree emerges. The trunks are sparse to the point of bunjin. Who else has envisaged using figs for literati styling? We are so accustomed to the massive trunks that are so easily achieved in



Figure 3. *Ficus* sp. A quintet of figs.

figs that we have not even tried to use them differently, until now. It will be interesting to see if this tree can be maintained in the long term. How will the ramification develop? Will the exquisite austerity continue into the future? I hope the artist keeps us informed.

The entire set of images from the Exhibition can be found at:

http://www.cbs.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=160&Itemid=79 .

The 'Naturally Inspired Symposium' was well named. Over 40 people attended and no one reported being uninspired by something that weekend. The reactions during the weekend, as well as in the formal feedback at the end, were immensely supportive.



ISSN 1445-7407

The opening *tour de force* was provided by a gentle and unassuming giant with a great sensitivity to our natural world. Gavin Gostelow has been hiding his flame for decades (some might say amongst the strings of ancient pianos), but he gave an unexpecting audience a glimpse at things that blow his mind with respect to eucalypts. It certainly stirred the minds of many who were there.

Gavin showed us a different way of looking at and seeing eucalypts. If you ask most people, let alone those interested in bonsai, to tell you what they think of when they remember eucalypts, most will tell you about their iconic shape as part of the Australian landscape and national ethos.

For Gavin, it is much more. He has seen the unbelievable colour combinations and textures in all parts of these great trees. The mixing of red, orange, yellow, lime and teal on a single short branch of a euc is mind blowing. This kind of explosion of colour and its combinations is what has set off art movements in other places on this vast planet. Occasionally we see it at home in the works of Hans Heysen and Arthur Boyd. But few bonsaiists talk of it, let alone champion it. However, many of those who saw and heard Gavin's presentation immediately recognised what he was saying and showing. Some had never really taken in the details and were surprised by what was there to see.

But colour is not the only inspiring thing about eucalypts. When looked at closely, as one must if you are going to try to create a miniature version of it, the way branches grow is vitally important. The detail of how the 'line of trunk and branch' move through space is subtle but at the core of the euc experience. There is no one 'eucalypt'

pattern. There are many. The need to study these trees closely is only matched by the need to select which one you will use to inspire the eucalypt you are training to grow in a pot. Tying down the horticultural techniques that will produce secondary, tertiary and quaternary branches is an area that still needs much attention. We have trunks of great shape and character turning up on display, yet I feel that the fine tuning of the branches is still a mountain range yet to be seriously reached rather than glimpsed.

I have just revisited Gavin's slide show and it is impossible to do it justice here. For me, it captures much of what the concept of 'eucalypt' means. The diversity of leaves, bark, branch forms, tree shapes is stunning. Gavin has so clearly opened the door to what must become an explosion of diversity in styling and finesse in eucalypts as bonsai. There is no *one* eucalypt style! Compare the trees in Figures 4 and 5, for example.

In Figure 4 we see a trunk that first divides



Figure 4. Low and long ramifying branches.

low down with the first 'branch' becoming a 'trunk' on its own and reaching to form a major part of the canopy – and so on up the 'trunk'. In Figure 5 we see a very strong central trunk, but with many side branches



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that remain short, clothing the trunk in the lower two thirds and only in the upper third forming part of the canopy.



Figure 5. Eucalypt with strong central trunk and short side branches.

We see in the strong *Eucalyptus sideroxylon* 'Rosea' (Figure 6) from the Exhibition, the development of a trunk of great character. The branches go from primary to final very quickly. This might be meant to show regeneration after catastrophe, but there is no evidence of the recent destruction that might have caused such massive regenerative growth – no fire scars; no deadwood from drought. Perhaps some resolving yet to come in this otherwise most enjoyable tree to see.

But this tree does pick up aspects of the aesthetic that Gavin portrayed: rugged trunks with complex pattern and textures.

Will Fletcher, this one-man tower of strength in the growing of Tasmanian native species as bonsai, treated people to some stunning views of pencil pines (*Athrotaxis cupressoides*) in the wilds of the southern Isle. Few were not

thrilled by the potential to show such beauty



Figure 6. *Eucalyptus sideroxylon* 'Rosea'.

in a bonsai pot.

Will's pencil pines (Figure 7) are more than just a contrasting look compared to Gavin's eucs. The explosion of eucalypt diversity in Australia is the story of tree growth after the Australian land mass split from Gondwana over 40 million years ago. The eucs are the newcomers on the block. The pencil pines represent our very ancient heritage of trees. They are more than just another conifer. When you capture the spirit of a pencil pine in a bonsai, you are looking into the very soul of ancient Gondwana itself.



Figure 7. Pencil pines, *Athrotaxus cupressoides*, in the highlands of Tasmania.



Figure 8. Pencil pine on lake shore, Tasmania.



Figure 9. First stage in creation of a pencil pine bonsai.

8) into practice (Figure 9). He showed us the results of his trial to recreate a weathered survivor. He demonstrated how he stripped the bark off much of the trunk and major branches, just as was seen in his photographs.

Shocking as it was, the early results certainly left a tree that was going to look like one of those iconic survivors in the wild.

Next year's Exhibition will be held in Melbourne on April 11 and 12. Details yet to come. It will be hosted by the recently formed Victorian Native Bonsai Club. Quentin Valentine has agreed to host the next session. This fits very well with the vision of the group who formed the APAB Exhibition and Symposium, to make it a 'national' enterprise. So, while it is great for people to have the opportunity to visit the national

Will, later in the day, put the theory (Figure



ISSN 1445-7407

capital to do ‘national’ things (and see national iconic institutions on the side), the willingness of people to host the sessions elsewhere in the country speaks well for the strength of interest in Australian plants as bonsai. I hope that many people in Victoria and elsewhere will watch for details, places and program, and then turn up to support the venture. [*Late news: location at Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne*]

The exhibition and symposium made a profit of \$2200.11. Half went to ANBG and half to the bonsai community. In previous years, the community share was donated to the National Bonsai and Penjing Collection of Australia. This year it is going to Ausbonsai to help pay for the online publishing of Gavin Gostelow’s research into eucalypts as bonsai, including the superb photos enjoyed by those who attended the symposium.

Inspired by Eucalypts

By Ambrose Canning

Thanks for the latest APAB newsletter Roger. Your article Ancient Australian Trees inspired me to respond with a potential newsletter item and I will do it right away before I forget, or something else crops up and I get distracted....

One of my many books is “If Trees Could Speak – stories of Australia’s greatest trees” by Bob Beale. It covers threatened trees, old trees, big trees, explorer’s trees, trees with vision, trees with spirit and many other great Australian trees. The trees of significance to me personally are ones I have visited, ones from my home state, Tasmania, or trees that in some way have special meaning for me.

My selection of six of them is presented below. There are great trees in every Australian state and territory and I am sure we each have our own favourite great trees.

The first of the book’s listed trees that I saw was the **Cazneaux Tree** in South Australia, listed in the book as a tree with vision. The Cazneaux Tree is beside the Flinders Ranges and near Wilpena Pound. Harold Cazneaux (1878-1953) was a professional photographer and in 1937 he took a photo of this river red gum and titled it “Spirit of Endurance”. As he described it “... One day when the sun shone hot and strong, I stood before this giant in silent wonder and admiration. The hot wind stirred the leafy boughs and some of the living elements of this tree passed to me in understanding and friendliness expressing the spirit of Australia”. About ten years ago I was in this area of SA and found the tree still there looking not identical but much the same as in the 1937 photo. It is signposted with a road leading to it. It is not the oldest, biggest or most aesthetic but it is a great tree.

The **Prison Tree** is a giant boab in the Kimberly region of Western Australia, near Derby. It has a circumference of about 15 metres and last century its hollow trunk was fitted with an iron gate to lock prisoners inside. This boab still grows and I visited it during a 4WD trip through the Kimberly region in 2008. It is obviously old and was already large and old when first recorded about 130 years ago, and so is now many hundreds of years old. A great big tree.

The **Bennelong Twins** (Figure 5) are two forest red gums (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*) that are literally in the centre of Sydney. On public land set aside by Governor Phillip in 1788, on the edge of the Bennelong Lawn at the end of the small ridge overlooking the



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Sydney Opera House and the harbour. It is believed that these twin trees were already growing here before the arrival of the British First Fleet in January 1788. These trees witnessed the original aboriginal people, the Cadigal, going about their daily lives, then the arrival of westerners at Sydney Cove and Farm Cove, the early clearing and settlement and over two centuries its transformation into the City of Sydney. The book's author Bob Beale has nominated them as Australia's most important historic trees. The day before the start of the Sydney AABC Convention in 2010, I went by train into Circular Quay and walked up to the Bennelong Lawn to view these great trees and try and imagine what they have seen.



Figure 10. The Bennelong Twins, *Eucalyptus tereticornis*. Photo by A. Canning.

The **Meelup Mallee** (*Eucalyptus phylacis*) is near the coast in southern Western Australia

and it was discovered by botanist Neville Marchant as recently as 1981. I visited in 2011, while on holiday and searched for this old tree. It is not marked and is not easy to find, and is a typical scrubby mallee with nothing to mark it as obviously great. I think I was looking at the Meelup mallee but I cannot be totally sure! There are only 27 individual trees. There had been more but they had been inadvertently cleared for the building of a scenic lookout and car park. DNA testing later revealed that all were genetically identical, so all part of one original plant. The book describes them as separate pieces of the same plant sprouting from a slowly spreading root system. No other Meelup mallee has ever been found, so it is a rare tree. But the real greatness is this tree's potential age.

Firstly I want to say that this raises a question as to what is a tree's real age. For an old conventional tree with exposed trunks, the age can be determined by counting the annual growth rings. Plus, we can see the tree and it looks old and it is this aged look that we try to replicate in our bonsai. The inner heart wood, the oldest part, is no longer alive and only the outer parts of a tree are really alive and growing. The heart wood may be rotten, missing, or burnt out while the tree is still living. In these cases we say and believe that the tree is so-many years old. There is a puzzling case with boabs, banksias and similar trees with pithy heart wood and less obvious or no annual growth rings to count for age. However, the large expanding trunk, tree size and old textures we read as age.

But what about an apple tree, for example? Modern apple trees are never grown from seed, they are all grafted. Therefore a growing tip has been cut off, grafted onto



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stock, grown into an apple tree, then in turn buds have been cut off and grafted to produce other apple trees. The original apple tree has not died, it has been kept alive by continual grafting to propagate new trees. So is the apple tree hundreds or thousands of years old? In my mind it is not, the original tree has been removed and human intervention has enabled propagation of a new tree. The old grafted part is so small it is insignificant, and it consisted of young growth.

Australia's mallees pose another dilemma. They have a large underground lignotuber that sprouts multiple stems which form the mallee tree that we see. They are said to be like an iceberg with more hidden below the surface that is visible above. But they send up new stems at various times and so no one stem is as old as the tree itself. So mallees are aged by determining the size of their mallee root and estimating the rate at which it is likely to have spread. As the lignotuber or mallee root grows it often forms and divides into an annular ring of mallee root pieces with each bearing its own clump of stems above ground. In the case of the Meelup mallee, its slow expansion had covered almost a hectare, meaning it was likely to be very old. But when the calculations were done by scientists the estimated age of this one surviving Meelup mallee was 6520 years old! Is this a true age if all that can we actually see is younger, and does it really matter?

In New South Wales the Mongarlowe mallee (*Eucalyptus recurva*) was similarly only identified as recently as 1985. In this case I have not been there and not seen it, but the book describes that only a total of five individual plants have been discovered. Its age has had to be estimated and being a mallee there is uncertainty about it, but the

largest of the trees could be 3000 years old. There are two of these mallees with groups of visible stems about 40 metres apart, and if proved genetically identical they could be parts of the same original tree. If this were the case then the estimated age of this tree would be about 13,000 years old. This seems amazing, almost unbelievable, but there are suspected to be even more ancient trees in Australia. In North America there is a huckleberry also thought to be 13,000 years old, so this great age is not unheard of.

The book, in its section on old trees, presents King's Holley (*Lomatia tasmanica*) as possibly the oldest living tree on earth, a freak of nature. A small slender tree of up to eight metres, growing in south-west Tasmania, it was discovered by Deny King who lived on the remote wilderness coast. University tests have shown that all the plants discovered are genetically identical, and further tests have shown that they are all sterile. So they cannot reproduce and all the surviving plants are in fact one plant. Fossilised leaves, identical to those on the living tree, have been found nearby, and since the tree is sterile and cannot reproduce sexually, the fossilised leaves must be from the same plant living there millennia ago. This tree is very old, its exact age is uncertain, but carbon dating of the leaf fossils has put its age as somewhere between 43,000 and 130,000 years old. A true ancient Australian Tree! A true freak of nature.

The book's author lists two distinguishing traits of trees as longevity and great size. What we recognise as significant trees usually combine both of these and in bonsai we use a collection of techniques to simulate great age and size. We are slowly developing a unique Australian style of bonsai with our natives that presents an impression of our really great



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native trees. It does not matter if our own trees are really old or not, as long as we are happy with the image they portray.

Eremophila as Bonsai

By Hazel Cusik

[I received the following lovely email from Hazel. She reports on her success with growing *Eremophila maculata* as bonsai. This is a much underutilised genus for bonsai. It is generally easy to grow and treat as bonsai, though it takes a little time to learn how to develop it well. It flowers profusely over a long period each year too. See what lovely work Hazel has achieved. Ed. RH]

Hi Roger

This is my *Eremophila maculata* sp. that I potted into the bonsai pot in Jan. this year, 2014 (Figure 11).

It started flowering in April, the flowers are 3/4 size compared to parent plant. It has not had any wiring done just selective pruning.



Figure 11. *Eremophila maculata* as bonsai.

The plant was chosen because it is easily propagated, it tolerates dry periods, has small leaves, and it will reshoot on the lower segments of the branch, therefore, if you make a mistake you can look forward to being able to make adjustments. It is a three year old cutting.

This was the first one I've done to see if it would tolerate the root pruning. I have given it a weak fertiliser every second week over summer; it is due for more now. It has been situated under the eaves with morning sunlight due to the hot summer sun.

We have had temperatures up to 50 degrees Celsius at the back where I keep my plants. I did put wire over the root ball to hold it in place for two months, then cut it back. I could have done a little more pruning to get better flowering but being the first year I didn't want to chance my luck. The adult plant stands just over a metre tall and in width. Cheers Hazel

Acacia howittii as bonsai

Excerpt from Bonsai Society of Sydney
Newsletter April-May 2014: report on demo by
Alan Peck.

Selection of a suitable apex for the tree

- Removal of weeping (downward) inward growing branches which would create more space between pot and remaining branches;
- Selective pruning to achieve the 'bouncing ball' (natural bow in the branch) effect *i.e.* removing growth just below an upward pointing branch';
- Thinning out to encourage new growth;
- The layered foliage on the first branch should have a lower drop than the foliage on the second branch
- Pruning below a branch junction increases ramification. The lower branches on the trunk are slightly longer in length whilst further up, the younger foliage is somewhat shorter thus creating an overall layered effect; and
- To repot, remove no more than one third of the super fine root mass.

[Editor's note: let me know if your experience is the same or different from Alan's.]

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Financial Year 1 July 2013 - 30 June 2014

Surname Given Name

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.....

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I belong to ASGAP society: SGAP, APS, WSWA, ANPS or 'none' (**circle one**). If 'none', you are invited to join as a 'contributing member', though you will not be covered for insurance at any Group activity. Your fees are the same; you will receive the newsletter and can contribute in the same manner as an ASGAP member.

If you belong to a bonsai society, please specify:

Annual Membership Fee:

New member and member who contributed information relevant to the Group or worked on behalf of the Group in <u>2012/13</u>	\$10.00
Member who has not contributed information relevant to the Group in <u>2012/13</u>	\$14.00
Overseas member	A\$20.00

Please make cheque/money order payable to: ASGAP Australian Plants as Bonsai Study Group and forward with this Renewal Form to the following address:

Australian Plants as Bonsai Study Group, PO Box 450, Jamison Post Office,
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Account No. 03276718, Acct name: ASGAP (**you must include the account name**).

Include your name on transfer so we know who has sent the money!!

If you pay by direct credit, please return this form so that I can ensure the contact details are correct – this includes **CLUBS**.

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please write your email address here:

.....
Money saved will be put to the publication fund.

Thank you to all who have contributed their information on the native species that they are growing. For those who haven't put pen to paper or fingers to key board, now it a good time to do it for at least one of the species you are growing. Every bit of information is important right now. Many thanks for your support. The information is needed for our first publication.

Please provide details here:

Name.....

City/Town State/Territory Post Code

It is important that that your records can be geographically located, as well as your contribution acknowledged.

If you replied last time and nothing has changed, please don't repeat the information. If you missed last time, please pick up a pen and do it now – it is valuable information.

Name (Common and/or scientific)	Pruning Date(s)	Repotting date(s)	Notes



Australian Plants as Bonsai

If not delivered, please return to PO Box 450, Jamison Post Office, Macquarie ACT 2614.

Study Group Information

The Australian Plants as Bonsai Study Group was formed in mid 2001. Its aims are:

- to determine which species of native Australian plants are grown as bonsai;
- to determine the horticultural characteristics and requirements of each species;
- to determine the artistic and aesthetic qualities of species; and
- to publish information to help people grow and enjoy Australian plants as bonsai.

To become a member, please send a cheque for \$14 (Aus.\$20 overseas) or postal money order to:

‘Australian Plants as Bonsai’, PO Box 450, Jamison Post Office, Macquarie ACT 2614, Australia.

Direct credit transfers can be made to Community CPS, **BSB 805-022, account no. 03276718;**

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