

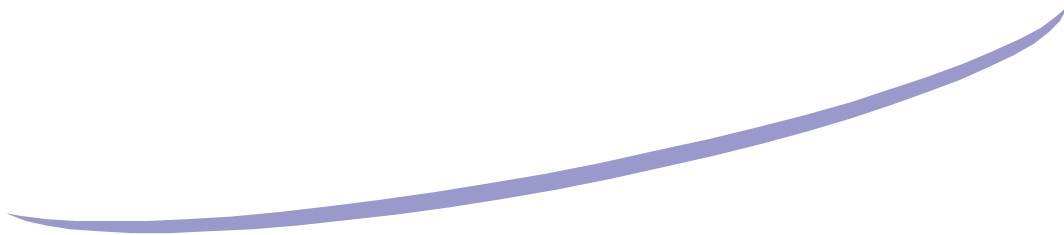
# APAB—N

: the Newsletter of the Australian Plants as Bonsai  
Study Group

January 2002

No. 1

ISSN 1447-107



## Welcome to APAB—N No. 1 !!

Welcome to the 26 founding members of the Australian Plants as Bonsai Study Group, and a warm hello to other readers of this Newsletter. APAB proudly operates under the auspices of the Association of Societies for Growing Australian Plants, who formally accepted the offer to create the SG in July 2001. All members of Societies belonging to ASGAP can become members of the SG, and other people with like interests can join as 'Newsletter Subscribers'.

The aims of APAB are listed later in this Newsletter.

Growing Australian plants as bonsai goes back to at least the 1930s, according to Dorothy Koreshof, that doyen of bonsai of Australia. There are a small number of books specifically on the subject, and references to the practice in a number of others. The number of people interested seems to grow steadily. The surprise and delight at the discovery that it can be done is quickly followed by the demand for information on how to do it, which species and with what aesthetics.

After 26 years of trial and error, demonstrations and shows, I decided it was time to try to organise a self helping group to record and share experiences of growing Australian plants as bonsai. Already there are urban myths of what can and cannot be done. There is much to learn and friendships to make. I hope that you will all actively join in with large and small contributions. Good Oz bonsaiing!

**Editor**

## APAB Special Projects are calling YOU!

It's probably a bit early in ABAP's life, but I'd like to float the idea of APAB special projects. While the answer for most queries about how and what to grow will be 'we don't yet know', – that's excitement, not a problem!

We will begin to make some progress when individuals or groups of people take on special projects to examine, for instance, the capacity of a number of species of *Melaleuca* or some other genus to shoot from old wood. The work could involve observing street and garden trees that have been pruned to see if and where resprouting occurs, or if it occurs in natural populations that have been damaged (fire, drought, lightning etc).

Write to me with your suggestions and offers on how to make APAB an interesting and useful Study Group. Try out the reporting forms and I will summarise your finding and report in *APABN*. Your experience for a single species will be a significant contribution. **Editor**

## Questions and Answers

**Pam Russell** of SA wrote: *‘As a new comer to this concept I would like to know (and I am sure others would too) of what Australian plants you have had the most success with, and how you achieved it, perhaps in the way of the Newsletter. I have heard some trees that don't have a long life are not suitable for bonsais, more information on this would be helpful when choosing what to get.*

There are over 3000 species of native trees in Australia and probably as many shrubs. Identifying which ones will make good bonsai is the challenge of our new Study Group. My experience says that some casuarinas are the easiest to grow, are ‘forgiving’ of mistakes, for example you can cut off most branches and start restyling again, and produce beautiful plants. The ‘leaves’ (branchlets) can vary in colour with the season and their age, and some have interesting bark textures. I have found *Allocasuarina torulosa*, *A. littoralis*, and *Casuarina glauca* to respond well to pot cultivation and styling.

There are other species that should work well with beginners as well as more experienced bonsaiists: *Melaleuca squamea*, *M. lateritia*, *M. preissiana*. Many other Melaleucas are suitable, but some are more difficult. *Baeckea virgata* (dwarf forms ) and *Eremophila maculata* are worth a try.

Remember, what works well in one climate zone of Australia, may not work or be readily available in another. I hope that APAB will help make this clearer as records accumulate

The longevity of trees is an interesting issue. Whether short or long life is better for bonsai has not been explored seriously. If you want a plant that can last for centuries, then longevity is important. What the effect of pot culture on the ageing of Oz plants is hasn't been studied in my experience, but I'd love to hear of people's experiences. If you grow and enjoy a short lived *Acacia* for 10-20 years at which time it dies, is this a bad thing? Would you not have a dog because it lives only that long? I would venture that very few people will grow bonsai for more than 50 years and very few of the trees they grow during that time will be around in another 50 years Since we can capture key moments of development and beauty as images on film, digitally, or as memories, the full expression of longevity is clearly a complex matter. My own experience is that none of my casualties in bonsai have been due to the ageing of the plant, rather to failures of my horticultural technique, or horticultural factors like the species simply does not re-shoot from old wood, thus limiting the time it looks OK in a pot.

Other people's experiences on the issues Pam raises are welcome for publication.  
**Editor.**

## *Australian Species as Bonsai*

In the first of what I hope will be a continuing series aimed at gathering knowledge on what species people are growing and what success they are having, I am starting with the short list also provided by **Pam Russell** from South Australia, who describes herself as a beginner. I was delighted to read her list and the notes, not just because it was input from another APAB member (which is like gold to a Newsletter editor!), but because it so clearly illustrated the importance and excitement which different climatic and floristic regions of the continent mean to bonsai. I've tried the *Agonis* several times (in Canberra) but the frosts always got it, so I don't grow it anymore. A splendid, large *A. flexuosa* was displayed at the Sydney 2000 Bonsai Seminar.

Here is Pam's list:

1. *Melaleuca gibbosa* - its growing well at present, about 3 years old.
2. *Myoporum floribundum* - growing and flowering well. I will cut it back well after it has finished flowering.
3. *Angonis flexuosa*. Still very young and has an abundance of large leaves.
4. *Acacia oswaldi*. Looked old when I bought it from the nursery, but very slow in growing, I've had it about a year now and only had a couple of new shoots on it, but it still looks alive, its about 140 mm tall.
5. *Melaleuca glomerata* - Only just put this in a bonsai pot, keeping fingers crossed.
6. *Phebalium stenophyllum* - Looked a good cascading plant; put it in a tall thin pot, so far so good.

## *Aims of APAB*

The aims of APAB are:

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

ASGAP Study Groups flourish when the topic of a Study Group is of keen interest to an equally keen group of people who are willing to take time to study, record and most importantly share with others. Queries, small bits of information, longer articles, the formation of sharply focused sub-groups and more are all part of the excitement and adventure of Study Groups. It only works if members are active. Already amongst our members there are some suggestions on what they want, and successes and failures of their experiences. Let's hear from you about your interests, your questions, your answers, your differing views about what works and what doesn't.

The Newsletter is a flexible forum for exchanging information amongst a small and widely dispersed group such as APAB. Elsewhere in this newsletter I've flagged some possible ways to proceed. Let's hear from you via email or snail mail, they're pretty much the same to bonsai!.

## *What's to be in the APAB Newsletter?*

Why do we want to grow Oz plants as bonsai? How do you go about doing it? What species can you use? These are some of the topics to explore in *APAB-N*.

I'm suggesting a number of headings for regular 'Columns' for *APAB-N*. They can be *regular* if enough text is provided. I will do my best to do brain-dumps for some of them, but there are limits to how long that can last and be interesting to you and viable for me.

Regular columns can be: Question & Answers, tree profiles, workbench timings and techniques, what to grow and why, 'commentary'.

Major articles (say 400—1200 words) are sought on subjects like: pots (styles, colours, sizes), ground covers (mosses, lichen gravel/sand), benches (sun / shade), soils, people, history, bibliography. What would interest you? Let me know, and make contributions

## *APAB—N and your Privacy*

Many of you will have heard about the new federal laws governing privacy in the private sector. I'm not sure whether the technicalities apply directly to us, but I believe that we should be clear of where we stand in terms of the operation of APAB.

It is a requirement of ASGAP, our mother organisation, that the Study Group Leader provide the national SG Coordinator with an annual list of names and addresses of members. This provides protection to the operation of the SG in case the Leader drops out without gracefully closing down.

As SG Leader, I will not pass our membership information to any other outside person without the express permission of each member. I'd like, however, your views on sharing addresses between members to facilitate local contacts.

## *Horticulture of Tasmanian Conifers as Bonsai: 1*

Since coming from Europe, I've found the Tasmanian native trees fascinating. On joining the Bonsai Society these trees were completely absent from the many displayed and demonstrated on. It is always a challenge to try something different, where there are no guidelines. After some complete failures and also successes, here is a little help for those adventurous enough to try this wide variety of trees.

Tasmania is blessed with a wide range of native conifers, many of which make good Bonsai. In the *Podocarpaceae* family, the creeping strawberry pine (*Microcachrys tetragona*) with its scarlet cones makes a striking cascade. It responds well to wiring, and needs to be propped up before it cascades. Naturally, it grows to a metre in length; rambling over the rocks of Mt Wellington, in almost no soil. Plenty of pruning is necessary and these prunings are easily rooted to make new plants. Like many natives it does not like to have its roots disturbed, dying back considerably every time it is repotted. To overcome this, plant it out in a larger pot than normal and leave it undisturbed for many years. As the tops of our mountains are usually high rainfall areas, it needs to be kept moist; but on the other hand, can withstand the strongest sunlight.

Closely related is the Huon Pine (*Lagarostrobos franklinii*), which naturally grows upright into a 30 metre tree. It is renowned for being slow growing and its weeping habit in the young branches gives it an attractive appearance. The brown wood can be wired easily, but the young green branches die back when wired. As the branches naturally grow upright when the wood hardens, very little training of the young wood is needed. Use raffia with or without weights if necessary. The Huon pine can withstand severe root pruning so can easily be placed in a very small pot. Like all conifers the natives should never be bare-rooted, as they also have mycorrhizae, the helpful fungi around their roots. Again, any prunings can easily be rooted at almost any time of the year.

In the *Cupressaceae* family, don't try the *Callitris* genus (for example, the Oyster Bay Pine), as it will not respond to pruning or any attempts at training! Save your money for other trees! However the *Diselma archeri* (no common name) responds well and should be pruned the same way as any exotic *Cupressus*. It can also be wired and its bushy appearance and regrowth on older wood make it ideal for shaping. There are different forms of this tree, some of which respond better as a cascade, while others are more suitable for the informal upright style. Again it is found naturally in our mountains, usually in more sheltered areas. Keep the roots wet and it grows best with some protection from the summer sun.

In the *Taxodiaceae* family, any of the 3 *Athrotaxis* species, such a Pencil pine and King Billy Pine can be used. Again, only wire on the brown older wood, as the green wood will die back on the places the wire touches. It will not kill the branch, but makes it look unsightly. Prune when the branches are young, using your nails. This may produce brown ends if you damage the previous segment. However this can easily be rectified at a later date. They respond well to repotting and root pruning and the prunings root easily. Unfortunately they are susceptible to a root rot, sometimes causing sudden death. These are all large trees in the wild, and seem to be able to withstand slightly drier conditions to the other native conifers, although they still receive a misting every week. Because they grow all the year round, they appear to need more water in the cooler winter months

[Copied, with minor edits, from *Bonsai Society of Southern Tasmania Newsletter No. 134 September and October 2001*; with permission of the Editor (author and APAB member) **Diana Jones**, Hobart.]

The above information from Diana Jones is exactly the kind that people want to know about Oz plants. Thanks Diana. For me, the information on species of *Diselma*, *Microcachrys* and *Athrotaxis* clarified and confirmed my own experience and wonderings about them, with added authority from someone who knows about their field situations.

My experience with *Callitris* is slightly different from Diana's. I fully agree that *Callitris oblonga* poses some severe challenges: it seems to only rarely shoot back from old wood, thus limiting its usefulness or greatly increasing the challenge to turn it into a bonsai. Other species of *Callitris* I have tried are variable in ease of growing, but *C. endlicheri* (Black Cypress Pine) and *C. glaucophylla* (White Cypress Pine) have been a delight to work with, even if a bit challenging.

## Oz Bonsai Images



It may be helpful and interesting to people growing Australian species as bonsai to see images of what other people's plants are looking like. Pam Valentine's husband is a good photographer, judging from the two images that Pam emailed to me (I've deleted the black background as it does not come out well in the copying for the newsletter, even though it does make some plants look good when images are professionally reproduced). This plant is *Eremophila tetraptera*. It is a species from the Diamantina River channel country of south-western Queensland. It grows as a shrub or small tree. The soil should be well drained, and the species is said to respond well to summer watering (*Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants suitable for horticulture*). Low rainfall, high temperatures as well as frost are all part of its natural growing conditions, but that doesn't mean that you can let it get bone dry in a bonsai pot!

*Eremophila* is a genus that deserves greater exploration for the potential for bonsai. There was a beautiful specimen on display in Sydney in 2000. It wasn't labelled but could have been *E. maculata* var. *aurea*. It's clear yellow flowers were in good proportion to the plant which was about 400 mm in 'length' as a cascade. The bright green leaves set off the flowers well, and the corky textured light brown bark was an

added feature. I added one to my collection last year . It would be good if anyone has a photo of what a mature plant looks like in the wild.

Styling Australian plant species for bonsai is a challenge. I am often asked “what style should I use for this species?” The answer is not usually straightforward. I’d like to hear from members about how they approach the styling of their plants. I’m happiest when I know something about the natural conditions under which the species grows...is it a lush, moist habitat or something characteristically dry; is the species typically a tall majestic tree or something smaller with curves that tell stories of a harsh life; is the crown typically a tight, narrow cylinder, or wide spreading, or divided into many small clumps; are the mature branches straight or contorted, ascending or drooping or both? When is it OK to style an Oz species to look like a black pine or a maple?

**Editor**

## *Back Page Musings*

Banksias can be grown as bonsai. I’ve seen some impressive specimens of *B. serrata* and *B. marginata*. They can also flower in bonsai pots, though there is a tension between different styles if you also want flowers. Flowers are produced apically (at the tips of stems) on parts of branches that are at least into their second year and often older. Regular and complete tip pruning to achieve shaping also removes any possibility of flowering unless some branches are allowed to grow out—and that affects the ‘style’ and aesthetics.

So, what styles or ‘models’ do you use for your banksias? How important is flowering to your concept of banksias as bonsai? Do you prune your banksias to look like pines or maples? Does it matter? What are the alternatives? Have you photos of mature *Banksia* trees?

All material in this Newsletter is copyright, but may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes as long a acknowledgement is made to the Newsletter and the author. For further information contact the Editor at [hnatiuk1@cyberone.com.au](mailto:hnatiuk1@cyberone.com.au).