

ASGAP AUSTRALIAN PLANTS AS BONSAI STUDY GROUP

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## Looking for inspiration in the 'Wild'

Text: R. Hnatiuk  
Photo: Tony Dibley

While attending an exhibition of art work at the ANU School of Art entitled *Contested Landscapes of Western Sydney*, held in conjunction with the Fenner 2010 Conference, I came upon this stunning photograph. It was entitled *The Struggle* and was taken by photo artist Tony Dibley.



How this tree manages to hang on is miraculous, but its canopy looks amazingly healthy. I thought some adventurous bonsai artists, with the necessary skills in fig-growing, might just want to rise to the challenge and try this Australian version of 'root and tree on wall' style. A warm, humid atmosphere to grow those aerial roots would be an advantage!

[Many thanks to Tony Dibley for permission to publish a copy of his wonderful photograph. This reduced, photocopied version doesn't do justice to the very high quality of the original, but it will serve to stimulate some 'out of the pot' thinking in styling, as well as encourage you to keep your eyes peeled for what is around your neighbourhood.]

## *Banksia marginata*

Ruth McLucas

The December 2009 issue of this newsletter included some information from the Albury/Wodonga Bonsai Society on *Banksia marginata* as bonsai, noting that they are "liable to drop dead if they get dry at any time" and "seem to appreciate a deeper pot". I would agree with this assessment. I have two *Banksia marginata* as bonsai, one dating back to the mid 1980s and one to 1999. I think they are great material for the Canberra region, being native to the area and cold tolerant, and I love the small leaves, at least in the specimens I have. I also love their wrinkled bark, which in my trees was spotted and reddish when young, becoming greyer as they age.

The older tree was pot-bound stock from a wholesale nursery. It has spent pretty much all of its life since then in deepish, but not overall large, bonsai pots of similar proportion to the one in the photo (Fig. 1). I don't think it's ever wanted for water, but it has flourished in the last few years since I started giving it regular doses of fertilizer. It did not like having the lowest branch wired down in its formative stage and took some time to get back reasonable vigour.

Once I made the hard decisions about which upper branches to remove, and now that it is growing so strongly, I

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Fig. 1 *Banksia marginata*, 1985 (approx.)

think this will help the vigour of the lower branches. This tree is developing a lovely patina of green lichen.

The younger plant (Fig. 2) was bonsai nursery stock which I grew on in the ground for several years. For the first few years it received plenty of water and regular in-ground root-pruning, but I dug it up about the time that water restrictions started to bite so I don't know how well it would have survived in the ground on less water. Where it sat on my bonsai stands until recently is probably the sunniest spot and also one of the driest as it is at the end of a dripper run. It was the only plant getting supplementary watering until I went to the AABC convention in May. When I returned after four days, it was showing signs of stress on the sunny side and many larger leaves have since turned partly brown, smaller leaves fully brown. I expect all branches to survive as there is enough green left on each one (I must do something about the straightness of the lowest branches!). Having checked that its root system is actually healthy, I have now moved it to the beginning of a run and put a leafless maple in its place. I will continue to monitor its soil moisture with my trusty water meter. It does need re-potting this spring to ensure good drainage.

I recently bought two *B. marginata* cultivars, 'Bright Flowers' and 'Miniature', which I am developing as shohin. I definitely recommend *B. marginata* for anyone wanting to try banksias as bonsai.



Fig. 2. *Banksia marginata*, 1999.

## A formula for fertiliser

Arthur Robinson

[The following article comes from the Satsuki Society of Australasia Newsletter: 1, 2009. The Editor has given permission for its reprinting here. He also notes that the original recipe came from Eiji Morozumi, Japanese Landscaping, Perth, WA.]

In a large plastic rubbish bin place:

- 20lb [9kg] Dynamic Lifter. This is pelletised chicken manure.
- 2lb [0.9kg] blood and bone
- 1 cup wood ash:
- ½ litre Seasol (a conditioner derived from seaweed)
- ½ litre fish emulsion:
- 15 litres water: (this quantity may be varied as 15litres produces a rather wet mix)
- trace elements.

These are stirred well and with a lid on, are allowed to brew for a few days. Do this quite far from the house as the smell is rather powerful!!

Allow it to dry a bit and when it is like a paste, form it into little pellets of about 25 mm x 12.5mm x 12.5mm. Place them on trays or some impervious material to dry. I use rubber gloves at all times otherwise no one will go near me for days!

Once dry, these can be placed on the pots and the goodness leaches out of them into the potting mixture. The effect is quite dramatic.

Some people do not bother to wait for the pellets to dry but spoon the mixture on while wet, in lumps. It seems to work just as well. I personally like the control that the dried ones give me.

The above formula provides a large volume of fertilizer and for most people about half or even a third would be quite enough. The shelf life is good and, if you are using dried pellets, they can be used throughout the year. It can also be used on other species of plant and I have found that my shimpakus have responded wonderfully with lush, dark and full growth.

If you have too much and some of it dries in the bin it can be wetted down again without any harm and works just as efficiently as fresh.

## Report on your mosses

Roger Hnatiuk

Chris Cargill, Australian National Botanic Gardens, has begun the long process of identifying the over 80 specimens of mosses that were gathered as part of this project. As soon as results are available, I'll report more of the details to you.

## Bonsai in Cloncurry, Qld

[The Study Group has struggled to contact bonsaiists from regional and rural areas of Australia. But from time to time, a wonderful contact is made. Below is an email I received from Hazel in Cloncurry, Qld. This is not the easiest of places to grow bonsai. It is so encouraging to read of such personal vigour in striving to do what you so want to. Well done Hazel, and good luck with both the growing of your bonsai and also acquiring those seeds from the bush. I'm greatly looking forward to many more 'Reports from Cloncurry'! Roger.]

Hi Roger,

*My friend Maxine said she had found this site regarding Bonsai's... There was a place where we could join, which I think she has done...*

*I do have a story about getting into doing, and learning this ancient art of Bonsai... I know absolutely nothing only what a chap from down Brisbane way showed me a couple of times and reading books.....*



*I have had a quick glance at the site you suggested and boy that's real serious work they have done... I won't have enough years left to get that*

*far....*

*Roger, I'm a total bush whoop and very proud of it so bear with me as I speak about the dear plants I have here and working on..*

*You seemed to be shocked at anyone growing these plants, yes in this hot hole of Cloncurry..... What plants do I use, well mate, anything I can get my hands onto.... To be honest I only know a few names of the beautiful trees around here... Most of the ones I use come from local gardeners or I get from a shop... He buys his plants from, haven't a curlew... Most times when we show interest in a plant the blinky price goes up from when we asked what it is.....lol... There are numerous stunted gums that live up on these rocky outcrops on the mountains so they could be great .... Would love to have a go at wattle, bottle brush and of course the lemon scented gum or blackbutt gums.....*

*I have an Umbrella tree which I've grown over a rock in a very shallow, no soil terecotta flat dish... Asked a lady if she*



*had a neglected potted fig tree and yep, she's now a proud owner of her 1<sup>st</sup> Bonsai over another rock formation...It's growing so well.. I have managed to get the other bits I cut off to strike, so now I can get them going..... Roger*

*you would have a blue fit if you watched me attacking these poor darling plants.... Oh by the way I love gardening just so much.....*



*Another one, is a Dessert Rose, which I spotted down at his shop, and it cried out to me to buy it...By the way, it cost a ruddy fortune, so after yanking it out of its miserable pot, I found a magic root system and*

*now it's growing so well....I didn't have a clue if it would grow, as I severely chopped into the root system.....*

*Roger will leave it there, as you will be wondering what the heck you have struck reading about my uncouth ways of doing Bonsai.... I do not have any of the special tools, rather treat my beautiful plants as you guys would say, rather harshly, but they grow..... I have seen a couple of plants which were over 28yrs old and they thrived out here in this climate..... Would*

love to use native trees from the bush but find that difficult as my old body doesn't allow me to go hunting for them....

Maxine I'm sure, will find me seeds one day when she gets a lapse from her job and Family.... Then I can grow my own trees to use..... It's a tough way to go about doing my dream but one day I will get there Roger..  
Take care and thanks for answering our mail....

Regards  
Hazel Bird,  
Cloncurry.....

## Inspiration from Tasmania

By Fred Straughan

Hello Roger, thanks for the latest newsletter sent out recently. I was inspired by the photos of trees in their natural environment so thought to send these two pics (Fig 1 & 2) I took last year on top of Mt. Wellington, Hobart. Not sure of the species but guess it may be a leptospermum ??? [Will Fletcher suggests it is most likely *Leptospermum rupestre*. Editor.]



Fig. 1. Habitat view of rock-hugging *Leptospermum rupestre*.



Fig. 2. *Leptospermum rupestre*, clinging to rock.

[And] more shots [Fig. 3]... taken at Dove Lake, Cradle Mountain last Friday. Not a cloud in the sky ! Cheers



Fig. 3. Silhouette of pencil pine, *Athrotaxis cupressoides*, Dove Lake.

## River sheoak styling

By Roger Hnatiuk

Have you tried growing the river she oak, *Casuarina cunninghamii*? It is one of the easy casuarinas horticulturally, and it is readily available from nurseries or from seed. But what does a very old river sheoak (RSO) look like?

There isn't just one 'style' that ancient RSOs display, but there are a few broad patterns that are worth looking at.

Characters that tell a story of great age in RSOs appear to be:

- Rounded, not pointy upper crowns (same as with most other trees) (Fig. 1).
- Sides of the crown are jagged, but roughly parallel (Fig 1).
- Trunks that are ridged (Fig. 2).
- Primary branches that may be very thick next to the trunk, but they don't always diminish in diameter from lowest to highest – it depends on the history of the tree, the kind and timing of life-shaping events of drought, fire and storm.
- Branch lines that are ragged to zig-zag with some broad curves along the way as well as striking, long, straight sections too (Fig 3).
- Trunks are usually straight(-ish); they can be single or often divide low or high into two or three slightly diverging trunks. These simple lines can often be interrupted by smaller, trunk-like, vertically growing branches from lower branches.

All of this makes for a tree that will be very full of character, challenging to produce, a delight as well as a

challenge to look at, and not likely to win a lot of friends until many viewers have had a chance to get to know these curmudgeonly old codgers.



Fig. 1. River sheoak, Lake Burley Griffin, ACT.

'Left-right-back' and smooth, sinuously curvaceous trunk and branch lines are easy to produce in this species, but they don't tell the story of the real river sheoak. The classical moyogi or informal upright



Fig. 2. RSO with ridges and burls in trunk.

trunk line is also easy to produce if you start with young material, but you will seldom see an RSO in the wild with such an alignment of the trunk.



Fig. 3. RSO branches that are a complex of curves, straights and zig-zags, Wee Jasper, NSW.

The RSOs are often found along stream and river banks (hence their name!). In these positions, they seem most frequently to grow with straight trunks. These trunks may be vertical, but they may often lean if the river bank collapses under them. (Figs 4, 5 & 6). The vertical and straight trunks make 'formal upright' an obvious choice for the bonsai trunk, but you might cavil at the use of the word 'formal' for a tree that will challenge much of the rest of 'formality'.



Fig. 4. Riverside with straight as well as 'leaning-over-water' RSOs, Wee Jasper, NSW.

Understanding what has been happening to these old trees will help one to understand how the branch lines develop in ways that seem so foreign to traditional bonsai concepts. I do not have records for any individual tree over the centuries (no surprises there), nor do I have detailed observations of young branches to confirm what I will say below. My intention has been to look at the forms, look at what happens to trees, and present a story that ties these together in a way that seems sensible. Others might hypothesize differently, but the important part is to recognise what are the actual shapes and lines of these old trees, because it is from

that that an artistic rendition in the form of a bonsai can develop.

Straight trunks are the norm, though they can also arch in long, gentle curves. The trees along river banks are often growing as narrow, riverine forests. Like most trees growing in groups, they compete with each other for light; they grow upwards as quickly as possible to ensure access to light, thus producing straight trunks which give the greatest height for the least amount of wood devoted to upwards growth.

Branches, on the other hand, are expendable because they can be easily regenerated from existing trunks or other branches. Most of them are much shorter lived than the trunk. A few will form the framework of the tree, and these will grow thick in diameter. However, before they grow thick, they will be subject to all the forces that impinge on small branches. These include quality of the growing season (access to moisture – think occurrence of drought or flooding rains), insect attack, wind damage, and wood rot, amongst others.

When growing conditions are optimal (lots of moisture, few insects, no destructive winds), stems can grow long and uninterrupted – that is, the branch line will be long and either straight or arching in broad, gentle curves.



Fig. 5. A group of RSOs progressively leaning over the water at Wee Jasper, NSW.

When conditions turn for the worse, the apex of a branch may die from drought, fire, wind damage or insect attack. The response of the tree will be to shoot a new branch; usually they start with many, many new branches close together, but eventually only one will take over as the new branch line. Now comes the interesting bit. If the branch tip is the tip of a young branch, the new branch will be only slightly smaller than the branch it comes off and this will result in only a slight change of direction of the growth of that branch. However, if the damage occurs to older branches that are already much larger than the new growth that

follows, there will be greater divergence from the line of growth of the original branch. This means that the branch line starts to trace a zigzag course which, not uncommonly, can be at right angles to the previous line or may even turn back on the previous alignment.

Depending on how many years pass before the next calamitous event affecting that branch, the branch will develop short or long sections between each direction change. Some may be to grow upwards, towards the sky, others may head out to the horizon, and others may grow back towards the earth. All in all, something chaotic may well eventuate!



Fig. 6. Undercut RSO on edge of stream. Cotter River, ACT.

Some other 'styles' are also found amongst RSOs. For example, when growing along the banks of small streams in narrow valleys, the trees can progressively close the canopy over the stream. Side branches facing the stream grow into the bright light available there, while the main trunk continues to grow upwards. I saw this along the Cotter River in the ACT, prior to the major fires in 2003. One could select this form for either an individual tree, as a variant on 'leaning over water' penjing, or you could explore the possibilities of creating a special group planting along a small 'stream' space.

Growing along stream lines has other hazards for trees. One major one is erosion. It can affect trees by weakening the bank, even undercutting it such that the large tree above loses some of its support on one side

and literally moves from being ‘erect’ to leaning’ (Fig. 5).

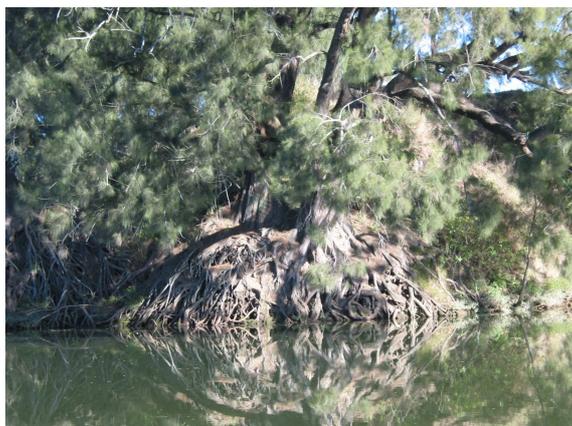


Fig. 7. River erosion exposing a dramatic ‘nebari’ for an RSO. Hawkesbury River, NSW.

Another impact of stream side erosion is that it may, in its early stages, perhaps, simply remove some of the surface soil, exposing the roots in the process. It is not uncommon to see trees in this state (Figs 6 and 7). One can produce this in bonsai once you have a good root system to expose.



Fig. 8. *Casuarina equisetifolia* by Henky Wahyu, Grand Prize winner, JAL 2001 bonsai photo competition. Shows beautifully controlled foliage masses through intense pruning.

Maintaining a bonsai in a pot with two different soil levels, which represent the stream bank as well as the eroded stream bed, can be challenging, because the impact of watering the tree will tend to continue the erosion of the ‘exposed stream bank’. Some clever manipulation, such as producing a mud bank, as is used in plantings on rocks or slabs, might just do the trick.

An aspect of styling of casuarinas, which I haven’t fully satisfied for myself, is how to develop the foliage masses. There are very good examples of the result that can be achieved with intense pruning (Fig. 8), which produces dense masses of short green branches. These masses, for me, don’t evoke the thinness of the casuarina canopy – the kind of form that will cause the wind to whistle softly as it blows through, not merely flow over. That mixture of visual and aural sensation



Fig. 9. RSO group setting illustrating the use of the naturally long, arching green branches to create the feeling of open, whispering-air associated with the casuarina canopy.

is very important to my joy in, and appreciation of, casuarinas. To produce the thinner canopy, as in Fig. 9, I have left the green branches to grow out to produce one version of a ‘canopy’ (Fig. 9) – you can almost feel and hear the wind when contemplating this setting. I have varied this form by plucking the tips when they are of the length I want but are still soft and easy to remove. This has worked, though not as evocative as the styling in Fig. 9. It produces a green branch length varying from the very short to the very long. Plucking early also seems to remove or reduce the creation of a damaged tip that turns white and detracts from the overall effect. Cutting the green branches with even very sharp scissors always left a tip that was damaged and looked bad after a week or so. Pruning the green branches is very labour-intensive as there are literally hundreds or thousands that need to be individually plucked every three to four days over many weeks during the growing season.

I’ll conclude with a few views of an old RSO growing on a limestone cliff top, some 25-30m above a stream. The environment is anything but ‘moist’. However, a fine specimen of RSO has managed not only to survive but to thrive. The tree looks very healthy indeed.



Fig. 8. *Casuarina cunninghamii* on edge of limestone cliff, Wee Jasper, NSW. A koorajong is growing beside it on the left.

The ridges and burls on the trunk attest to great age. You might study the outline of the canopy on the sides and the top to help you to decide how to shape your own RSO bonsai.

### Notes from Jason

[The following article is from emailed notes and images from Jason Caruso. Many thanks Jason. Your offer of updates for December is most welcome. Roger]

As far as my stock goes, many of my bonsais that are in bonsai pots were purchased as quite advanced nursery stock and I have rescued them from near death. I know that's probably not the best for a bonsai, as it has not developed over time and adapted to root pruning and conditions, but they have done well and have quite nicely developed trunks. The bonsai pots I use are not very shallow either. I tend to use deeper pots, especially as watering very thin pots gets quite demanding during summer heat waves.

The only problem I have with root wrapping, as you had mentioned, was from a plant I had bought as a proper 'bonsai starter' that was bought from a bonsai retailer! It's my *Angophora costata*. Most of my present specimens have good root/trunk growth and they were purchased as overgrown nursery stock.

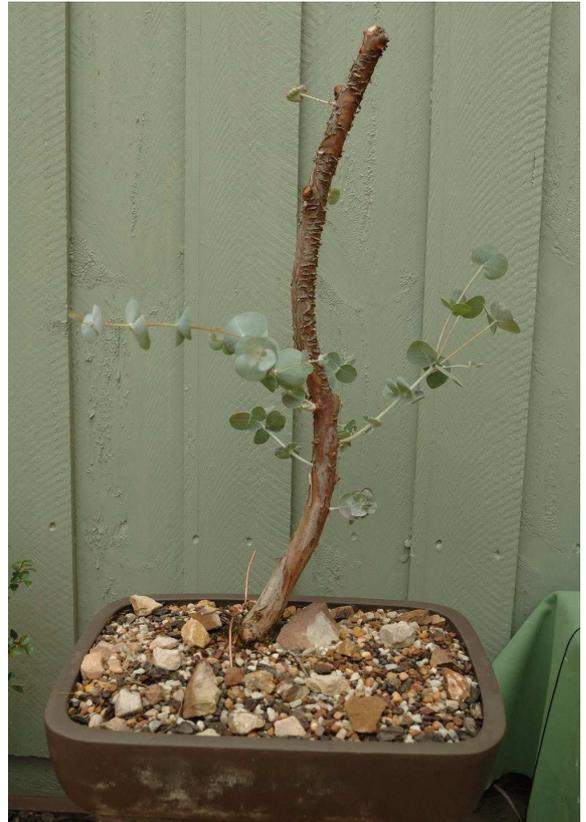


Fig. 1. *Eucalyptus crucis*, Sept 2009.

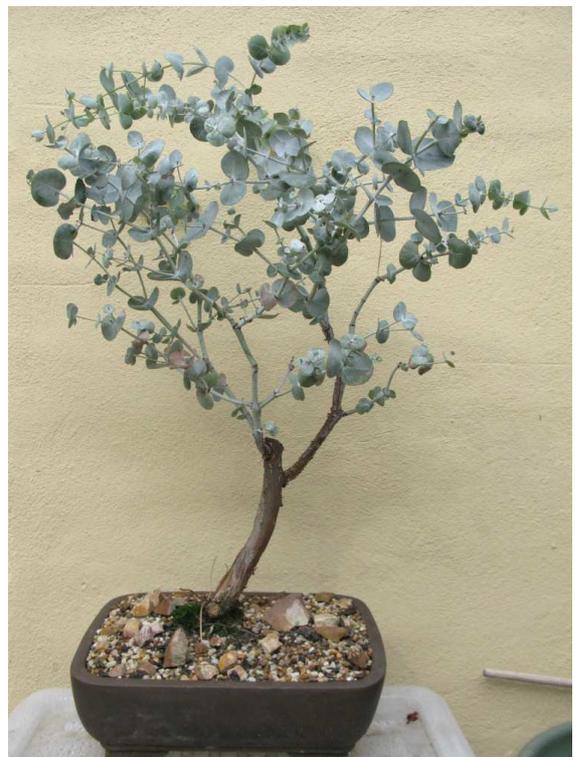


Fig. 2. *E. crucis* Aug. 2009.

I will, however, have to start repotting some of the stock I have grown from seed into larger pots. Some are still in tubes to save space. I have a selection of pots I am

using for training and am presently putting a few into orchid pots.



Fig. 3. *E. crucis*; close-up of cut trunk, regrowth branches and early stage of 'mini-richi' bark.

The orchid pots are also deepish, round and have excellent drainage. I found out about them on a



Fig. 4. *E. crucis*, close-up of trunk base and bark.

bonsai forum where they were growing eucs in them. I have a red gum in one now that is one of my fav's at the moment. I cannot believe the amount of growth it has put on. It was grown from seed I collected and the trunk has surpassed other advanced stock I have bought and it's only a couple of years old. They are fantastic specimens! I love the specimen on the ANBG web site of 2006.

I also have planted a forest setting, like the camphora on the website, but instead I am using *Eucalyptus barberi*. They look great and have been grown from seed in a rectangular ice-cream container.

Look forward to the newsletter and many thanks again for your help. I may send through a couple of images if I get a chance to take some for comments/suggestions?? if that's OK.

*Eucalyptus crucis*: developments over two years:

## Yamadori *Melaleuca parvistaminea*

By Myles Higgins

[The following is taken from an email from Myles. This collected melaleuca is fantastic. We'll certainly be looking forward to updates on its progress. Roger]

Dug up this melaleuca (Fig. 1) from my brother's farm in Gippsland.



Fig. 1. *Melaleuca parvistaminea*, in the field.

The cattle had been rolling on the plants to scratch themselves as well as eating the tops off them. I dug up what I thought was three or four plants in a group that I thought I could separate and reposition to get a nice group planting.

In 2006 I placed it in a large container without

touching the roots, and filled in the sides with extra soil. Not wanting to lose the larger plant, I was not game to touch it for 6 months. I first scraped away the heavy layer of grass and found it was one plant, with one branch broken and holding on by the bark, grass and some new roots it had sent out over the top of the plant.

Every few months I would scrape away one side of the plant into the roots about one third, then mix the soil with 50 percent bonsai soil and add it back into that side of the pot. I also separated the roots of the broken branch and placed some fly wire between them and the main plant's roots. Late in 2007 I slipped the main plant out of its container and dug up through the bottom and cut as much of the tap root as I was game (turned out to be enough); again replacing soil with 50/50 mix.



Fig. 2. Melaleuca in Oct 2008..

Finally, after reading everything I could find (particularly the APAB-N newsletters I could get access too), I re-potted it into a large bonsai pot 600mm x 400mm x100 mm (Fig. 2.). The magpie and post are the size of a coke can. I want to create an Australian theme, not a Japanese or Chinese one. Note that the tree has five trunks.



Fig. 3. The 'separated' branch now re-potted on its own.

I came home in Oct 2009 after being away for 3 months to find flower buds, so with much

excitement, I decided to repot before flowering. Re-potted into smaller, round 400mm x 100 mm three-legged pot; separated the broken branch and re-potted it separately (Fig. 3). I was pleased with the root growth (Fig. 4.). The plant flowered later in the month (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Repotted in Oct. 2008.

I removed more soil from around the top of the plant to show more of the trunk and found a root jutting out at 90 degrees, so over 6 months clipped off 20 mm at a time, till I was back to the trunk. I will lift higher next repot (around Sept/Oct 2010), if there is a good root ball. I have wired the transplanted branch and found the branches very flexible, but I'm not sure whether they hold their shape. I will wire the main tree and look to thin out but not sure what shape I want to achieve yet.



Fig. 5. Flowering in Oct. 2008.

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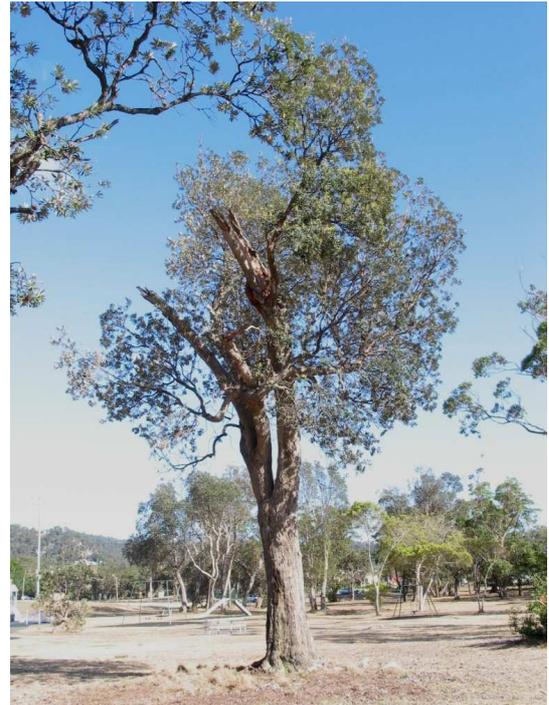
**CREDIT.** We still have one outstanding payment from two years ago and have no idea who made it! Also, Clubs, please give your Treasurer the renewal form and ask them to send it with their payment.

Also, send in your observations and records of your experiences with your plants. It's what makes the Study Group successful for you and everyone else.

### ***Some concluding notes***

By Roger Hnatiuk

And just to finish off the Newsletter, here are a few images of trees to stimulate you to think about your styling with Australian native species. [Roger]



*Banksia integrifolia*, Umina beach park, NSW. Veteran tree that has survived wind, storm and decay for a century or more.



Looking for a model for a group setting of *Banksia integrifolia*? Look at this natural group exposed when land was cleared for a park at Umina, NSW.



*Acacia ?melanoxylon*, black wood, on Erinundra Plateau, Vic, growing in wet temperate rainforest.



# *Australian Plants as Bonsai*

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## *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 \$13 (Aus.\$17 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; account name: ASGAP.**

The Study Group Leader is Roger Hnatiuk. Contact him at the above postal address or at

**Email:** [rjhnatiuk@yahoo.com.au](mailto:rjhnatiuk@yahoo.com.au)