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Using Tasmanian Plants for Miniature Landscapes

By Will Fletcher

I have recently been experimenting with constructing miniature landscapes, where part of the landscape is water, or makes the suggestion of water. I have been inspired by leafing through several references, specifically, *Penjing: Worlds of Wonderment* by Qingquan Zhao and Robert Steven's two excellent offerings, *Vision of my Soul* and *Mission of Transformation*.

The Chinese term for a land-and-water landscape is shuihan penjing. In Japanese, miniature landscapes are known as saikei, and in Vietnam rock and water creations are hon non bo. In Tasmania, I call them miniature landscapes!

Not having any pre-made suitable pots (where half of the pot is for water holding, the other half with a drainage hole – there seems to be limited designs of these anyway), I decided to use some of the glazed trays I had put aside, and by gluing a casual edge of rocks across the tray, divided the tray so that one side was for mounded planting mix, leaving the other side open for water. However, there was no water barrier between the two halves, and the edges of the trays were 2-3 cm high. The side for plants, although mounded, was therefore going to get very wet, and stay that way.

Well, I thought, we have quite a few Tasmanian plants that grow in very wet areas, so I will try some of these. For several years now, I have quite successfully grown some of our alpine cushion plants in wet trays. Onto these trays, I usually glued some rocks (I am using a product called 'Sikaflex'), then gently mounded the potting mix, and planted the water-loving species.

On the tray in Figure 1, I constructed a 'Mt Wellington' landscape. The summit of Mt Wellington (Hobart's local hill... about 1200m high) is characterised in some areas by large dolerite tors rising out of the low



Figure 1. Mt Wellington landscape in a tray.

alpine shrubbery. This tray planting is 40cm x 25cm x 2cm deep, has no drainage holes, and has been established for two years. The two species of cushion plant (*Drachophyllum minimum* and *Pterygopappus lawrencei*) and the pineapple grass (*Astelia alpina*) are thriving, as are mosses and assorted weeds.

After the success of these wet, cushion-plant landscapes, I more recently attempted using some taller, 'tree-like' shrubs in the

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landscapes. I have two species that have now gone through the winter quite happily in their wet trays, so I'm hoping they will be suitable for this type of construction. They are a low, compact-growing form of the swamp honeymyrtle, (*Melaleuca squamea*) and the fine-foliaged, mountain baeckea (*Baeckea gunniana*). Both have small, fairly compact foliage, and are suitable for smaller bonsai.

The two trays, shown in Figures 2 and 3, (length 30cm), feature a simple construction of two rocks, one tree and one stretch of water in each. As they have only had six-months trial as yet, I can't conclusively say whether this extra-wet system will work in the long term. If it doesn't, I will have to devise an invisible, waterproof barrier, and drill a drainage hole on the plant side.



Figure 2. *Melaleuca squamea* in tray landscape.

***Melaleuca squamea*.** My experience with this species as bonsai, is that it dries out more quickly than any other species I have trialled, so this setup may just be the solution.

***Baeckea gunniana*.** I have successfully grown this species as a bonsai for 15 years, and find it very hardy.

After the success to date of these two small pieces, I have recently constructed a larger work (Figure 4), where the rock work is more of a feature and the water area is more expansive. The tray is 45cm x 29cm x 2cm (max. water depth) and the tree is a 5-year

old *Diselma archeri*, the dwarf pine (previously known as the Cheshunt Pine). It



Figure 3. *Baeckea gunniana* in tray landscape.

has been planted for a month. So far so good. Although I have used a potting mix, I see no reason why a good, composted loam would not work, as drainage is not an issue. The only problem, using soil could be discolouration of the water body. Moss makes a terrific permeable edge to use amongst the rocks.



Figure 4. *Diselma archeri* in water landscape.

My eye is regularly caught by the reflection in the water as I walk past this piece, and I often pause briefly and enjoy the scene. Subsequently, I have decided that I really like the inclusion of water set amongst the bonsai in my collection, and could quite happily have more of it.

There is obviously limited scope for using this wet-tray method for miniature land and water landscapes due to the small number of species that would enjoy this sodden experience. However, if you have little or

no edge on your tray (or rock /slate slab), you can have your plant life on a mound or mounds, and leave some of the tray bare, thus alluding to water. This effect can be enhanced by having some rocks appearing as islands. For this to work effectively, you need to have flat-bottomed rocks (either naturally occurring or cut with a diamond-bladed saw or similar) both as islands and for the water-land interface. These appear to be emerging from the water. On these flat trays, your planted areas will not be too wet.



Figure 5. *Baeckea gunniana* landscape.

Alternatively, if you choose a low sided tray with drainage holes, you can build a landscape and again have your water simulated. The flat-bottomed rocks and the use of sand or pebbles to suggest the water component can work quite nicely.

With these last two methods, your choice of plant material is huge, and there are any number of Australian species that you could utilise.

The final, superb landscape (Figure 5), was constructed recently by a student, Sue Healy, in the first 'Miniature Landscape Class' I've run. The photo was taken two weeks after construction, and Sue has kindly given me permission to use it for this article.

She put this piece together using some 'aerated' basalt rock (from the bottom of her garden! I think I might have to visit this garden!!), which she glued onto the unglazed tray (with drainage holes), and then planted this (unwired) cascading form of *Baeckea gunniana* from a 14cm nursery pot. The fine gravel, spread over the tray, could simulate water (although it may be more suggestive using a gravel or sand of a lighter colour). Maybe it just simulates gravel!

Anyway, I think this piece is marvellous, and it just demonstrates how you can put together an 'instant' miniature landscape with the help of some props, in this case sculptural rocks. I was quite surprised by the sense of age and permanence it engendered the instant it was finished.

Notes from South Australia

By Pam Russell

Hi Roger

The *Acacia papyricarpa* is doing very well. I have attached pictures taken in November 2011 (Figure 1), and one when I first pruned it in March 2008 (Figure 2).



Figure 1 *Acacia papyricarpa*, western myall,.

Also, I have attached some information from a brochure from the Whyalla Conservation Park regarding this acacia as it grows in the wild in South Australia, (see page 7).

Attached too, is a recent photo (November 2011) of the lilly pilly which was pruned at the beginning of this year, and the foliage again in May. It seems to be a prolific grower and, I think it needs styling again now.

Unfortunately I haven't a photo of what it was like when I first did it in 2008, but it has more than doubled in size since then. I have been tip pruning it regularly.



Figure 2. *Acacia papyricarpa*, western myall, 2008.



Figure 3. *Acmena smithii*, lilly pilly, November 2011.

Nothofagus moorei: the Antarctic beech from NSW

By Rob Stephens

The *Nothofagus moorei* grows on the highest parts of the rainforest mountains in northern NSW and southern Queensland. It's believed to have once covered much of the continent in cooler times, however it is now confined to a quite restricted range.

It's a large, long-lived-tree in nature. It is frequently has large, moss-covered, exposed roots, multiple trunks and often a large number of small stems arising from the lower portions of the tree. A truly stunning tree if accompanied by some mist. New growth comes in great shades of red with older leaves having a hard glossy surface and serrated margins (Figure 1).

See the Wikipedia entry at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nothofagus_moorei for an introduction.



Figure 1. new, red leaves of *Nothofagus moorei*.

Acquiring trees

It's a rare tree in cultivation and few nurseries stock it. I acquired my original trees from Dorrigo Nursery:

<http://www.dorrigonursery.com/page27.html>.



Figure 2. *Nothofagus moorei* forest from mountains in central eastern Australia.

Yamina Rare Plants have several *Nothofagus* varieties listed on their website including the *moorei*:
<http://www.yaminarareplants.com.au/contents/shrubsAndTreesN.htm> .

I dealt with them some years ago when chasing some other trees and was very happy with the service. Other rare plant dealers may also have them

Propagation

I lost one of my trees while it was planted in the ground when I failed to notice how dry it had gotten. Since then I've been working to build up the number of trees I have. I've tried a lot of cuttings and two grew roots, one of which has survived to grow well. I don't have a bottom heat device, and humidity control has been very basic, so it's possible that they may do far better from cuttings in more experienced hands.

I've done one aerial layer previously which worked well, and currently have two trees with attempts at aerial layering (Figure 3)

underway and another with a branch layered into a nearby pot.



Figure 3. Aerial laying of Antarctic beech.

I've never had access to seeds to test their germination rates but have read that at one point it was believed that the trees could no longer reproduce from seed (since disproved), relying on suckering to reproduce. I assume that reproduction from seed is not reliable and have no idea at what age trees begin to produce seeds.

Care

I keep my *Nothofagus* in a shade house, primarily to reduce the moisture loss. Once I've got a few more available I intend to try growing some on open benches to see if that changes the growth patterns. They seem to be relatively hardy if moisture is kept up to them and have survived some very hot dry Queensland summers (and one very wet one). I'm located near the bay and close to sea level in SE Qld.

They produce shoots quite vigorously following pruning. I've not tested it yet but suspect that they would raise multiple suckers if a trunk was cut off.

Styling

I've done very little styling with these trees, I've pruned them from time to time as well as my attempts to reproduce them (Figure 4). Ideally I'd like to be able reproduce something like the look of them in nature e.g. multi-trunk informal upright with exposed roots (Figure 2). I believe that they would be suitable for other styles. The young shoots are quite flexible, although I have an unproven suspicion that wiring them too far in a direction they don't want to go may lead to that branch dying off. Sorry, not enough wiring or notes to confirm that.

Alternatives

I've tried *Nothofagus cunninghamii* but did not manage to keep the plants alive through a Qld summer. They have a much smaller leaf than *N. moorei* and I suspect would make a great bonsai subject.



Figure 4. Young *Nothofagus moorei* bonsai.

WESTERN MYALL

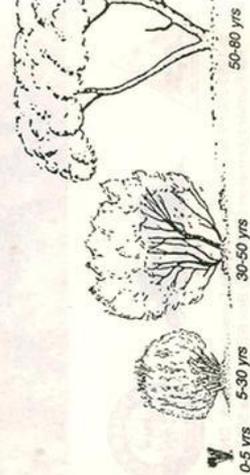
Introduction

The most common tree of the Whyalla area is the Western Myall (*Acacia papyrocarpa*), popular because of its attractive silver-grey foliage and large dome shaped canopy. Although essentially a South Australian tree, the Myall's range extends westwards from Pt. Augusta into Western Australia. The area of Myalls which the Park is in has been described by the Australian Heritage Commission as one of its best occurrences.



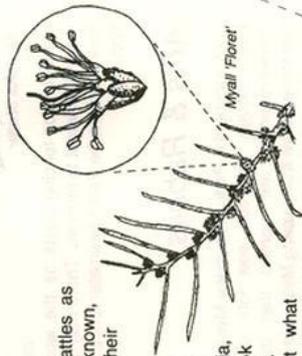
Distribution of *Acacia papyrocarpa*.

The Western Myall grows in sandy loam soils, and is frequently found growing with Hoary Bluebush, as it is in the Park. Ecologists call the arrangement of the trees a 'Low Open Woodland'. Growing up to 7 metres tall, the Myall can tolerate very dry conditions and can live for over 250 years. The approximate age of a Myall can be estimated by its shape (see the diagram below).



Flowers & Leaves?

Like many Acacias, the Myall's leaves and flowers are not what they seem. A large amount of a plant's water is lost by evaporation through its leaves. To keep the surface area through which this might occur as small as possible, most Acacias have shrunk their leaves until they are very small or non-existent, and only have true leaves when they are seedlings. What appears to be leaves on the Myall are actually leaf-stalks, called phyllodes, which have taken over the role of photosynthesis (making food for the plant).



Acacias, or Wattles as they are better known, are loved for their many fluffy yellow flowers. The next time you are near a flowering Acacia, take a close look at its 'flowers'.

You'll see that what appears to be a single flower is in fact made up of as many as 25 tiny 'florets'. Myalls flower irregularly, usually from August to November, but may produce more flowers following years with good summer rainfall.

Minimizing Water Loss

The Myall, like most Australian plants and animals which live in the arid outback, has adapted itself and its way of life to suit the harsh conditions. Examine the nearest Myall tree, and look closely at how the phyllodes hang in relation to the sun (see the diagram below). In summer, the Myall presents the smallest possible surface area of its phyllodes to the harsh sun high in the sky. This ensures that water lost by evaporation through the phyllodes is kept to a minimum. In winter, the sun strikes the phyllodes at right angles to give the tree maximum benefit for photosynthesis.

Summer Sun

Look underneath a mature Myall. What do you find covering the ground?

The tree uses this dense carpet of cast off foliage as a mulch, protecting the moisture in the soil from evaporating. Scratch away a little of this 'litter layer' and see if the soil is damp. (Don't forget to return the litter back to where you found it!)

Winter Sun



225-250+ yrs

Scale: 1cm = 1m Source: R. Lange & R. Purdie, Australian Rangeland Journal 1/1976 p65

Copy of a brochure from the Whyalla Conservation Park, SA, with information on *Acacia papyrocarpa*, western myall. The developmental sequence with expected age along the bottom is of particular interest with respect to 'style' for bonsai of this species. (See page 3 for main article in the newsletter.)

Inspiring Trees

By Merle Thompson,
comments by R Hnatiuk

[In Newsletter number 19, Merle had some fascinating figs growing on enormous rocks in eastern NSW. Merle has continued to send in pictures of bonsai-inspiring trees from her extensive collection made over many decades.

Here is a selection of some more trees from Merle. Thank you very much Merle, for making these available to Members. Roger Hnatiuk, Study Group Leader]

Figure 1 is of an *Acacia papyrocarpa*, western myall, the same species mentioned in Pam Russell's article



Figure 1. *Acacia papyrocarpa*, western myall, Arid Lands Botanic Gardens, Port Augusta SA.

earlier in this newsletter. Merle writes 'It is so big it has a seat inside and about 6-8 of us fitted in at once.' One can only guess at what forces hit this massive tree and caused it to curve in this manner. The trunk arises on the right, but quickly takes a right angle bend parallel to the ground, then another right angle bend straight up, rising and arching strongly over to the left. At both the left and right sides the tree grows a respectable crown.

If you look closely, you can see that the upper surface of the trunk on the right and across the top has been killed and is of exposed dead wood.

Here are some cascading casuarinas from the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. Note the lines the branches take and compare these to the classical Japanese and Chinese styling of cascades. You may see that the casuarinas have different lines and thus a different character, but are still clearly cascading trunks.

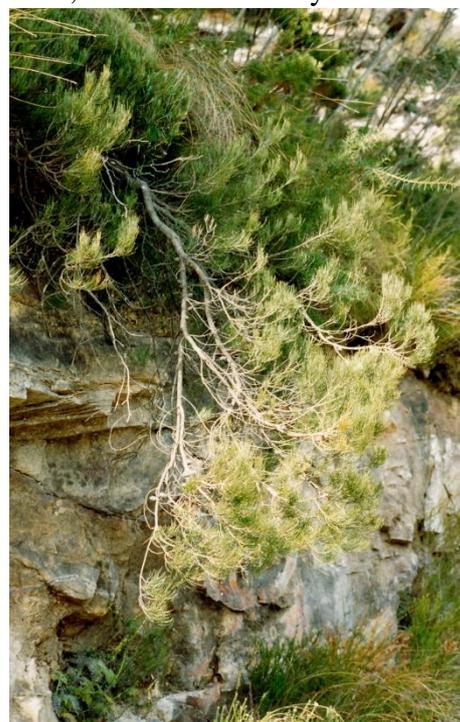


Figure 2. Cascading casuarina.



Figure 3. Cascading casuarina.



Australian Native Plants as Bonsai

9th National Exhibition and
Symposium

At the Australian National
Botanic Gardens
Canberra
17-18 March 2012

Please consider entering a tree in
the exhibition and/or
attending the Symposium.

Ray Nesci will be the guest
presenter and workshop leader
for the Symposium. He has chosen
to talk about and will
demonstrate using, the water gum
(*Tristaniopsis sp.*).



The symposium workshops will
also cover other Australian native
plant species.

The theme of the symposium will
be composing and shaping native
species as bonsai.

For more details or questions,
contact Neil Wilson on
0434 196 604,

Email nativeshow@cbs.org.au or
visit <http://www.cbs.org.au/>

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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 \$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