

ANPSA AUSTRALIAN PLANTS AS BONSAI STUDY GROUP

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Financial Year 1 July 2012 - 30 June 2013

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Wollemi Pine as a Bonsai – My Experience

By Megumi Bennett

Introduction

In 1994 the discovery of an ancient tree, thought to have been extinct for the last 200 million years, made news headlines and fired the imagination of many people. David Nobles, a park ranger, had found 22 of these trees in a series of sheltered sandstone gorges in the Wollemi National Park. It would appear that the gorges had protected the trees from natural disasters such as bushfires and drought that regularly ravage the area. The tallest tree was about 40 meters high with a trunk about 1 metre in diameter. The tree was estimated to be about 400 years old.

The tree belonged to the family Araucariaceae, a group of ancient evergreen conifers. The family includes: the monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*), Norfolk Island pine (*A. heterophylla*), the hoop pine (*A. cunninghamii*), and the bunya pine (*A. bidwillii*). The new tree was named *Wollemia nobilis* or Wollemi Pine after the area it was found in and the park ranger, who found it.

After the news broke, one of the promotional officers approached me to create a Wollemi pine bonsai. I potted one tree in a round Japanese pot and used the second one as a rock setting on a piece of flat sandstone. They looked very good and were used to make a promotional slide. At the time I was not allowed to keep any of the branches to use as cuttings.

After the Wollemi pine was released for sale in April 2006, I was invited to visit the

Wollemi Pine Nursery, to advise on the possibility of using the pine as bonsai. The nursery was part of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries in Gympie. The facility was huge with a very tight security and hygiene system.

While I was there I learnt a lot about growing the pine, the Director of the nursery providing an in-depth explanation as we went around. One of the staff had already tried growing it as a bonsai, but they just looked like pot plants. The staff were not sure what to do, and at that time I was the same. My biggest concern was that the tree had a single trunk, no branching and large frond like leaves that looked untidy and elongated. However, they were very unusual and had a very ancient look. I asked the Director whether or not the foliage became thicker and whether true branches formed as the tree matured. The answer was 'NO', so I immediately thought that this tree would not be good as bonsai material. However, before coming to a final conclusion, I would need to grow and study this tree.

Thus my Wollemi pine adventure began in July 2006. I purchased 20 trees between 4 and 5 years old in 18cm plastic pots.

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Figure 1. Wollemi pine with good branches.

Together with some of my students I started re-potting them into bonsai pots in September. We gave them a very light root prune and reduced the stem by one third.

Of all the trees we potted up; the tree in Figure 1 shows the best result so far. This tree shows very good traditional bonsai structure with true branches in the first and second position as well as a back branch. It stands 37cm high, is 30 cm in width and 27cm in depth.

The series of diagrams on the next page shows what we did to this particular tree using the "cut and grow" method and what is planned for this year, 2012.

Observations

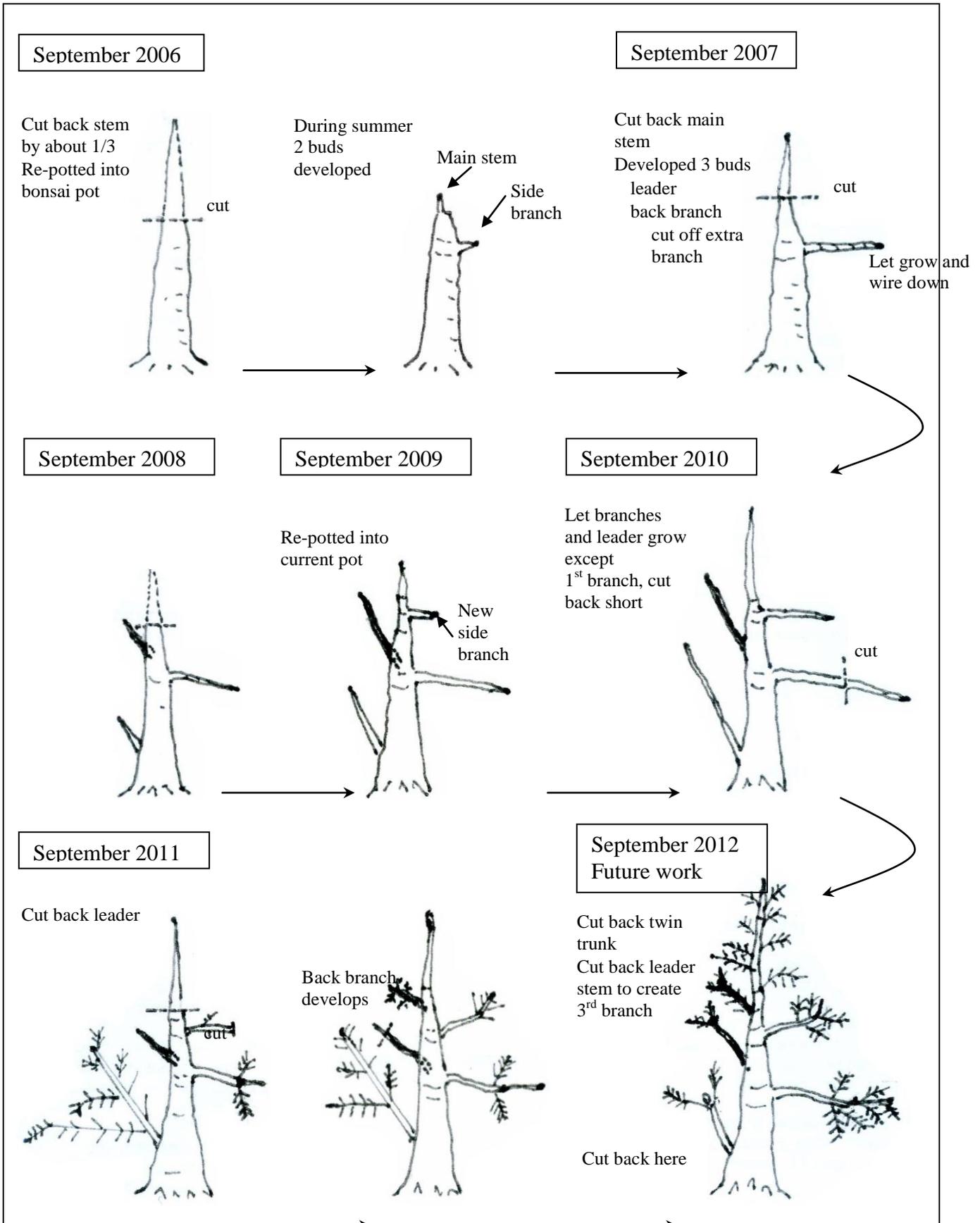
Over the six years that I have been working with the Wollemi pine I have made the following observations:

1. **Position** – The trees adapts to many different environments, however they grow very well with sun in the morning, developing deep green foliage. If left in the strong afternoon sun, the leaves tend to burn off at the ends.
2. **Trunk** – When young the trunk is straight with a satiny smooth bark. As the tree matures the bark begins to look bubbly and like prehistoric dinosaur skin.
3. **Apical Buds** – Often called polar caps, they have a white waxy coating during the dormant season in winter, that disappears in spring. They look pretty and cute just like a rounded flower.
4. **Foliage** – The mature frond-like foliage develops an unusual arrangement for the leaflets. The leaflets are arranged so that every second one points up and the next one points down. This arrangement appeals to us as it reminds us of the spines on a Stegosaurus back, straight out of the dinosaur age.
5. **Growth habit** – The Wollemi pine naturally produces multiple trunks, and very little branching.

Horticultural Method

1. **Repotting** – Trees will tolerate a reasonable amount of root pruning in the warmer seasons.
2. **Stem pruning** – They can be pruned from winter to spring. New shoots will become a branch and a main trunk. The tree must be pruned to induce branching.
3. **Foliage pruning** – New foliage will develop after the leaf frond is pruned. I have found that if I prune back to the fifth leaflet from the base, the leaf will shoot again. If I go back as far as the third leaflet, then sometimes the whole branchlet will die.
4. **Reduction of foliage** – I have found that the foliage has begun to reduce after 6 years of training as a bonsai.
5. **Styles** – Because of the multi-trunk growth habit, this tree is suitable for one, two or three trunk style. It all depends on where the tree shoots after pruning.
6. **Wiring** – Trees will tolerate wiring on both old and new growth.
7. **Soil** – The tree needs to grow in a soil that has good drainage.
8. **Fertilizer** – I have been using Osmocote® for Australian Natives and liquid fertilizers as a backup, with great success.

Cut and Grow Method for Wollemi Pine



Conclusion

This article is the first I have written about using the Wollemi pine as a bonsai, and in it I have simply reported on what I have tried and found to work so far. I wanted to see if there was any method that could be used to develop true branches along the main trunk and not just the frond-like foliage. In this I have in part succeeded, but it is early days and I need more time to study and watch the development of my other Wollemi pines. Also, what I have tried to create is a traditional Japanese style of bonsai, with a first branch, then a back branch that is followed by a second branch and so on.

You may well ask, as I have, as to whether or not this is appropriate for an Australian native pine, as we know that the “traditional styles” do not suit some Australian natives. If we try and force them into these more traditional styles it ruins their natural and beautiful form. However, it was somewhere to start to find out what might be possible. So, as we find out more, I’m sure a natural style for the Wollemi pine as a bonsai will develop. So, if anyone has tried something different, achieved different results, has some different ideas or suggestions, I would like to hear from them. I’m sure we can make this ancient tree into a beautiful and inspiring bonsai.

Tasmanian Backpacker’s Notes

By Will Fletcher

New Years Greetings Roger!

Thanks for the latest APAB newsletter and for including my mini landscape perambulations. I’ll do something on trees next time!

I’ve been fortunate to be able to enjoy a four day walk into the wilderness (6 weeks training, with a weighted pack, paid off!!).

The week before Christmas, four of us headed off to Lake Rhona, a jewel in the central south. This glacial lake, halfway up the Denison Range is characterised by a white, sandy beach, and a well vegetated sand dune along its northern edge! We had it all to

ourselves and the weather gods were most accommodating!

After a fire in the early ‘80s, a lakeside *Athrotaxis* forest was all but destroyed. The area is now well clothed again, but with only a handful of lake-hugging pines remaining.

It was interesting to see they were all *Athrotaxis laxifolia*. On our ‘rest’ day we walked into the next valley, and around Crooked Lake and down the outlet stream, all *Athrotaxis* were *A. cupressoides*! And all growing in completely waterlogged soils!

[Editor’s note: I published all of Will’s note. It is a modern day account that harkens back to people who centuries to millennia ago ventured into the mountains for inspiration that they later used in creating paintings, poetry and bonsai. By sharing this inspiration, Will has helped others who won’t make such a trip, to also feel inspired in their designing of their own bonsai. Thanks Will.]

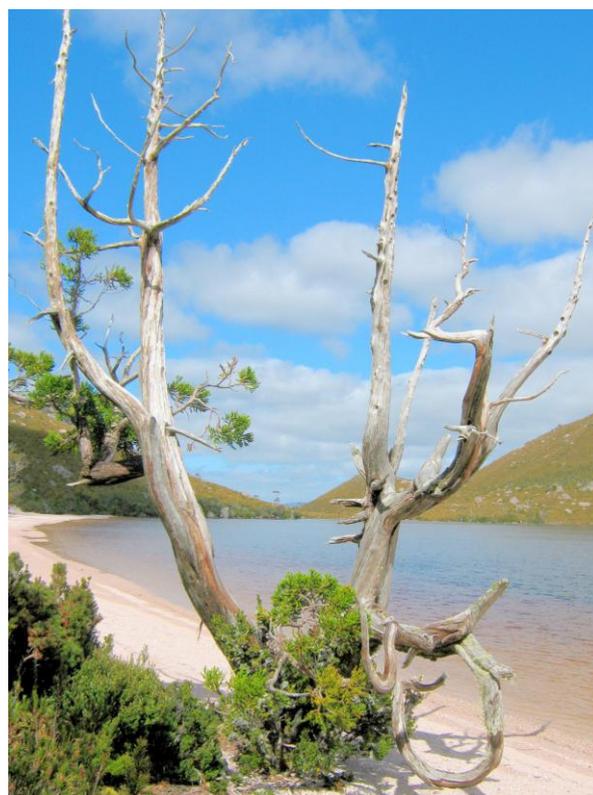


Figure 1. Double pronged spar is *Athrotaxis laxifolia* on Lake Rhona. Note the live branches at the base and on the lowest left.



Figure 2. Verdant pines on Crooked Lake are *Athrotaxis cupressoides*)

COMMISSIONING POTS

By Lee Wright

What do you do when you get a tree that simply does not look good in a conventional pot? What do you do when you have a special tree and you want something out of the ordinary to showcase it?

There are a great many trees that look fine in a commercial pot and because these are readily available this is the easiest option. But they don't always work. The olive in Figure 1 simply does not gel with a standard pot.

The rugged nature of the tree and its small stature but heavily weighted base completely overwhelm conventional pots. This bonsai gives 'rugged' a serious meaning and a smooth, even-rimmed pot did it no justice at all, regardless of how suitable the glaze was. I had purchased a pot from Pat Kennedy several years earlier for a very odd olive and I



Figure 1. Olive in a Pat Kennedy pot.

commissioned Pat to create a similar feeling pot in the necessary size.

The pot gives a rough country feel, the freeform adds to the tree's credibility and the visual weight of the pot harmonises with the bonsai without ever over-shadowing it. There is no way a conventional pot could duplicate this feeling.

To prove this point here's another olive in a Japanese pot (Figure 2) and in a Roger

Hnatiuk pot (Figure 3). The Japanese pot is the right size and colour and a good shape to hold the tree but it doesn't sing with the tree. It's just there. The Roger Hnatiuk pot places the olive in the harsh, dry environs it would thrive in. The size of the pot anchors the tree and gives it great stability, while the high-rising, textured trunk allows the olive to dominate and still co-ordinate beautifully and the two become a matching duo.



Figure 2. Olive in a Japanese pot.



Figure 3. Olive in a Roger Hnatiuk pot.

Bi-coloured leaves are not favourites with bonsai enthusiasts tho' you do see them now and again. When I found this coprosma I was taken with the tortured, twisted trunk and the colour of the foliage. I felt it was imperative

that a pot did not contrast with the tree, it had to embody the same colouration and also had to convey a sense of harshness that the growth of the trunk dictated. The pot was going to have to be substantially larger than the trunk to visually support the foliage pads yet have a delicacy to match the tree's airy structure. I contacted Janet Selby, showed her the tree and told her what I envisaged. This is the result and it works.



Figure 4. Variegated coprosma in a Janet Selby pot.

When my sandpaper fig started achieving its potential I wanted a quiet pot with a textured surface and a matt glaze (Figure 5). Luckily I had visited Penny Davis at her Mudlark Pottery studio in Newcastle and snapped up this pot because it was a size I like and it was ideal for natives with its rustic, refined elegance. The sandpaper slid in and embraced it and the two unify beautifully. The pot conveys the undergrowth riverbank area the sandpaper would frequent. The pot is noticeable for its quality and suitability but the tree has the main say. Again, this is a perfect pairing that would be harder to achieve with the majority of conventional pots.



Figure 5. Sandpaper fig in a Penny Davis pot.

Another Penny Davis/Mudlark pot was bought because it screamed ‘native’ to my eyes and my *Melaleuca linariifolia* loves it. (Figure 6). The darker glaze colouration on the left of the pot mimics a shadow of the trunk on the water and the viewer can easily conjure up an Australian native by a billabong.



Figure 6. *Melaleuca linariifolia* in a Penny Davis/Mudlark pot.

I commissioned Pat Kennedy, of Mirkwood, to make a pot for another hard-to-situate bonsai. The pot had to be rough and refined, it had to mimic a cliff side and its strength had to empower the delicacy of the tree growing from a cleft in a rock, stretching to the light for survival. Although this *Kunzea* simply does not photograph well it is beautiful and one of my favourites.



Figure 7. *Kunzea* in a Pat Kennedy/Mirkwood pot.

Yes, I take my visual images very seriously. If I am creating a bonsai, the tree and the pot have to say the same thing, promote and strengthen the same image. I don’t just put a tree in a pot because I happen to have the pot. I have spent great lengths of time and love creating the artistry in a tree and the pot must enhance that. Otherwise where is the art? You can’t have ‘part art’. You can’t create a nice tree and leave it at that... the pot MUST complement the tree and amplify the story the tree is telling. Australian natives in particular do better in handmade pots.

So how does one commission a pot?

Each potter has a distinct style and a preferred range of glazes so if you want a potter to make a pot in a particular colour you might be out of luck if it is not in their range. This is why it is good to have an idea of each potter’s style and output.

It does help if you can attend bonsai shows or seminars where bonsai potters exhibit their handmade pots. You can also attend bonsai exhibitions, study the pots and chat with the show organisers to identify the potter. Take a close up photo of the pot, don’t worry about the tree, as a reminder of the glaze and surface texture. Local potters are easily identifiable and you have the contact details at the end of this article.

You can also read articles like this one and get a feel for potters and their pots.

You can ask a potter to duplicate a pot from a photograph, but keep in mind that each potter has his own style and glazes and you won’t

get an identical pot. You will get their interpretation. This is not wrong. This is artistic imperative and, if a potter is creating original works, asking for an identical copy is doing a disservice to the original potter and the artist you are liaising with. I have discovered the hard fact of handmade potting: that it is all but impossible to duplicate exactly a pot size or glaze. There will be a variation, and all the potters I deal with will make several pots for a commission and the buyer chooses the one closest to his preference. Everyone is individual.

Sometimes it doesn't happen but usually one of the pots is ideal. Sometimes there is an accident in the glazing and/or the kiln and the result is magic and never to be repeated. That's the one you latch onto and find a tree for it, if it is unsuitable for the tree in question.

There is no problem asking a potter to make one of his pots in a different size or glaze.

Travel to a potter's studio. Get some enthusiasts together, make an appointment with the potter and have a day out. You can end up with more pots than you planned on but what riches.

Back to commissioning... have a very good idea of the size you want. It is a good idea to put the tree in a pot the size you are considering to see how it suits. Silly? Over a year, I commissioned three handmade pots for one tree based on carefully taken measurements of what I thought the tree needed. In the end another tree is in one pot and I sold the other two. Despite the fact the measurements seemed correct each pot was too big. With the carved olive in Figure 1, I bought two of these pots convinced that the smaller was the right one but the larger one was better. It is tricky, but again, worth the effort. And I sell the unwanted pots on Ausbonai so it is a win/win.

If you have an awkward tree, take it to the potter and discuss the tree's needs. The potter will give you a price so you know where you stand. You must keep in mind that you are not buying off the shelf, it could take 6-8 weeks at least to get your pot made as the potter is reliant on weather conditions, drying

times and filling a kiln, as well as possible breakages and remaking. So don't commission today for a show next week because it won't happen.

I absolutely love bonsai and I have enlarged that love to include handmade pots. I'm a genuine certifiable potoholic and every local potter knows it and they smile broadly when they see me heading towards their wares. My trees are better dressed than I am. Pots are very important to strengthen the quality of a good tree and a joy to work with. This side obsession might not be to everyone's preference but even a couple handmade pots will enhance your collection. Go for it. And to that end:

Mirkwood Forest Bonsai Pots –

Potter: Pat Kennedy:

Tumut NSW 6946 2956, 0400 216 563

Mudlark Bonsai Pots -

Potter: Penny Davis:

Blackalls Park, Newcastle NSW
(02) 4959 4492,
mudlarkpottery@bigpond.com

Or Google Mudlark Pottery Blog.

Janet Selby Pots -

Potter: Janet Selby:

Canterbury NSW (02) 9589 4636,
0421 369 707 www.janetselby.com.au
janetselby@bigpond.com

Potter: Roger Hnatiuk:

is very elusive about pot making. If you have one of his, then treasure it and keep a lookout on club sale tables for a rare possibility to get one.



The National Bonsai & Penjing Collection of Australia

now inviting
entries for

CENTENARY BONSAI PRIZE 2013

\$6000 first prize*
*Conditions apply

Centenary Bonsai Prize

National Bonsai & Penjing Collection's
Centenary Bonsai Prize: 2013

To mark the centenary of the declaration of Canberra as the National Capital of Australia, the National Bonsai & Penjing Collection of Australia (NBPCA) offers the Centenary Bonsai Prize.

The Centenary Bonsai Prize celebrates the centenary of Canberra as the nation's capital and each decade after that until the bicentennial in 2113. It does this by offering a prize to some of the best bonsai artists in Australia who demonstrate the highest artistic and horticultural qualities in the art of bonsai in Australia.

The NBPCA invites bonsai artists working in Australia to submit photographs of their bonsai for the Centenary Bonsai Prize.

*The Centenary Prize is an *acquisition prize* and the winning tree becomes part of the National Collection.

The winner will receive:

- a. a cheque for \$6000,
- b. a plaque, which they can keep for one year before returning it to the Collection, and
- c. a framed certificate of the award to keep

Submission of Entries:

Entries must be submitted in photographic form. Four images are required: front, back, and both left and right sides of the tree, in either:

- JPEG format (preferable) sized at a minimum 1MB and maximum 2MB. Pictures must be emailed to nbpca@bigpond.com before the closing date (1st April 2013).
- Hard copy picture (alternate). Pictures must be posted to The Curator, NBPCA, GPO Box 956, Canberra, ACT 2601 to arrive before the closing date. If you require the hard copy photographs to be returned, please supply an appropriate stamped self-addressed envelope.
- NOTE. As the trees are being assessed from the pictures provided by the entrant; please ensure that the photos are of the highest quality to give your bonsai or penjing the best chance of winning.
- Trees should be photographed against a plain background.
- Print photo entries must be a minimum 8" x 10" in colour.
- For tips on photographing bonsai, see Old Mister Crow's guide to photographing bonsai and kusamono by Carl T. Bergstrom at:
<http://octavia.zoology.washington.edu/bonsai/photography/CrowsGuide.html>

Each image must be labelled to show which view it is (i.e. front, back, left or right). The owners name and tree name must also accompany each image. If one person submits more than one tree of

the same species, then the image labels must include a sequence number.

For example:

J Smith Eucalyptus nicholii 1 front.jpg

J Smith Eucalyptus nicholii 2 front.jpg

An artist may submit more than one entry, however, each entry must be submitted separately, either by separate email, or separate envelope if posting.

Each submission must be accompanied by an entry form, go :

<http://www.nbpca.com.au/Centenary%20Bonsai%20Prize%20form%20on%20NBPCA%20Letterhead%20012%20-%20PDF.pdf.pdf> (or go to the nbpca.com.au website and click through to the form.

Closing date for entries is 1st April 2013.

Entry to this competition is free of charge.

Judging:

The judging of the Centenary Bonsai Prize will be by one International Bonsai Artist, and two Australian Bonsai Artists.

Rainforest Inspiration

By Merle Thompson



[Here is another wonderful tree to inspire those who grow Australian rainforest species. Thanks Merle for another great pic. Merle said the species may be Ceratopetalum apetalum. Editor]

Picture taken at Centennial Glen, Blackheath, NSW.

Flowering Success with *Banksia serrata*

By Jacki Gracey

I have not been particularly scientific in my record keeping but I have kept a bit of a diary on the one I have but I only have one. I have had it since 1994 and purchased it as a 5 year old nursery plant.

The photos below tell the tale to some extent but I knew to do the repotting in summer and before repotting I often gave the plant a good cutback. Sometimes this meant February as the summer would get away.

The first flower I had was in January 2005. This was quite a small not full candle. It was repotted into the same pot in December 2006. Over 2007 a larger flower bud produced a full sized banksia flower for the summer of 2008.

Early January 2009 the plant was cut back and repotted. I was away for 6 months of that year and so the plant was not touched except for excellent watering by my daughter. In September after my return I noticed 4 flower buds had started to grow, by October this was 11 flower buds and in November a total of 15 flower buds were growing. I removed several of these for the sake of the plant but this is what brought me to the conclusion that it is better for me to do my repotting and cutting back in the earlier months of summer. Since that extraordinary flowering season I have had one or two buds.

My Sydney garden is very sheltered and warm and so the growing season is long. I hope this is of some help and look forward to paying a bit more attention to growing patterns as I try to grow a few more natives as bonsai.



Figure 1 *Banksia serrata*



Figure 2. *Banksia serrata* showing flower cones.



Figure 3. *Banksia serrata* in display setting.



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;**

account name: ASGAP. INCLUDE YOUR NAME IN TRANSFER

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

Email: rjhnatiuk@yahoo.com.au