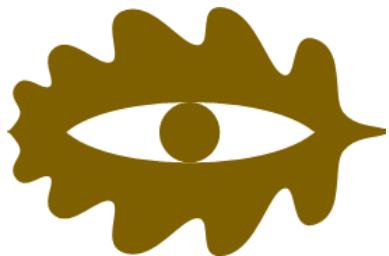


An Evening of Bonsai

Session B: Bonsai Aesthetics

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October 2025



Nemeta Bonsai
nemeta.co.uk



Learning Outcomes

Theory

- ▶ Be aware of the history and culture of bonsai
- ▶ Understand (at a high level) how a bonsai is produced
- ▶ Understand (at a high level) what distinguishes good and bad bonsai
- ▶ Know how to maintain a bonsai on a day-to-day basis
- ▶ Experience the key activities of re-potting, pruning and wiring
- ▶ Be aware of inexpensive options for further learning and practice

Practical

- ▶ Watering bonsai
- ▶ Wiring a bonsai pot for re-potting
- ▶ Exposing the nebari
- ▶ Potting the prepared tree
- ▶ Pruning for bulk, congestion and taper
- ▶ Wiring for shape

Recap

Highlights of Evening A

Bonsai: Art & Science

Good bonsai practice is:

- ▶ **Authentic** - makes you think “tree”
Tree as biological / ecological process
- ▶ **Dramatic** - makes you think “TREE”
Tree as compositional element
- ▶ **Pragmatic** - doesn’t make you think
“*dead tree*”...
Tree as living clay



I Had One Once, But It Died

What a bonsai needs to survive

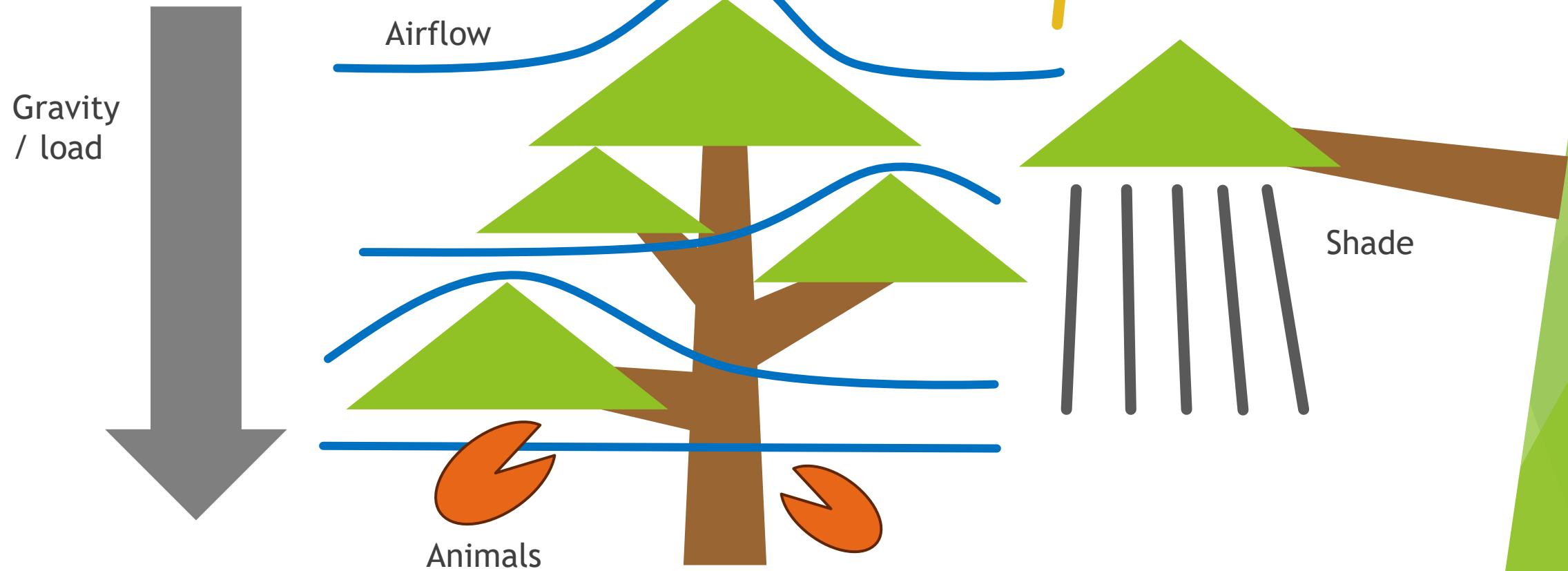
- ▶ Environment
 - ▶ Indoor vs Outdoor
- ▶ Watering!!!!
 - ▶ Single biggest killer of bonsai
 - ▶ “Root hairs” die easily in drought
 - ▶ Over-watering is also dangerous!
- ▶ Light
- ▶ Heat
 - ▶ Dormancy
- ▶ Airflow
- ▶ Pest Control
 - ▶ Animals: spider mites, scale bugs, aphids, caterpillars, vine weevil, squirrels
 - ▶ Plants etc: pearlwort, liverwort, wood sorrel, pennywort, nostoc
 - ▶ Caution: environmental issues!
- ▶ Fertiliser
 - ▶ “Balanced”: roughly even NPK
 - ▶ Organic => micronutrients
 - ▶ Caution: environmental & ethical issues!
- ▶ Bonsai are far harder to keep alive than most common pot plants!

Authenticity & Drama

Thinking Like A Tree (That's Seen Some S**t)

Arboriculture 101

What shapes a tree?



Authenticity & Age

What makes a tree look mature?



- ▶ Taper
 - ▶ “Nebari” (根張り) = root flare / buttress
 - ▶ Trunk & branch flare: from base to apex / tip
 - ▶ Trunk-to-branch (and branch to sub-branch) ratio
- ▶ Canopy shape
 - ▶ Rounded triangle
 - ▶ Composed of rounded-triangle “pads” (for species that back-bud less readily)
- ▶ Trunk & branch behaviour
 - ▶ Short inter-node distance
 - ▶ “Ramification”: fractal splitting of branches
 - ▶ “Square-cube law”: big tree = proportionally heavier load = more curvature
 - ▶ “Ruptures”: jagged direction changes
- ▶ Texture
 - ▶ Bark
 - ▶ Dead-wood: advanced bonsai topic!

Art à la Japan

Catching the eye



It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident.

- Theodore Adorno (1969)

Key elements of visual design:

- ▶ Movement & rhythm
- ▶ Balance: symmetry vs asymmetry
- ▶ Similarity & harmony vs contrast & variety
- ▶ Perspective & proportion
- ▶ Repetition & continuation
- ▶ Unity: wow factor

Japan-specific additions:

- ▶ “Wabisabi” (侘び寂び - literally “forlorn rusticism”): austere, naturalistic, often hard-worn beauty and elegance
- ▶ Top-right to bottom-left traditional reading

Drama & Perspective

What makes a tree stand out?



- ▶ Well-defined “front”
 - ▶ Style is firmly established
 - ▶ Sense of strength or movement captured
 - ▶ Clear view of lower trunk
 - ▶ No crossed branches
 - ▶ Tree’s “centre of mass” is in middle of pot
- ▶ Taper (again!)
 - ▶ Taper appears stronger from viewpoint at base of tree
- ▶ Pot: picture-frame for tree
 - ▶ “Heavy” earthenware vs “light” glazed
 - ▶ Depth \approx trunk thickness; width \approx 2/3 canopy height (tall tree) or width (wide tree)
 - ▶ Style: heavy vs light, plain vs ornate
- ▶ Use of negative space
 - ▶ ...Often in imitation of wind-flow or trunk death in full-scale trees
- ▶ Scaled-down decorations
 - ▶ Moss “grass”, accent plants, rocks (“suiseki”)

Flaws

What gives the game away?

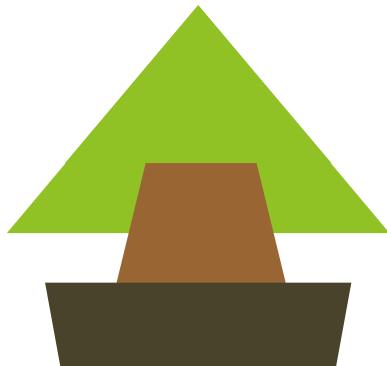


- ▶ Weak / immature-looking branches
 - ▶ Suckers
 - ▶ Congested nodes
 - ▶ Under-slung / elbow branches
 - ▶ Lack of clear “leader” (dominant trunk / branch)
- ▶ Obvious tool marks
 - ▶ ...Including wire scarring
- ▶ Excessive symmetry
 - ▶ ...Especially handlebar branches
 - ▶ Asymmetry is a common theme in Japanese gardening!
- ▶ “Reverse taper”
- ▶ Unusual “habit” for species / genus
 - ▶ Google for pictures of wild tree to get ideas!
 - ▶ This rule is frequently ignored: e.g. small shrubs portrayed as large trees, boringly-shaped species made interesting, unrealistic pads
- ▶ Dead leaves and (unwanted) deadwood

Bonsai Styles

The most common four archetypes of... *thirty?* Really?!

Formal Upright



- ▶ Strong, proud, “yang”
- ▶ Pot: unglazed earthenware; simple shape; bulging
- ▶ Can be hard to develop taper, especially on conifers

Cascade



- ▶ Flowing, falling
- ▶ Pot: deep to make space
- ▶ “Half-cascade” runs to base of pot; “cascade” goes below that

Informal Upright



- ▶ Relaxed, elegant, “yin”
- ▶ Pot: glazed; fluting; flowery
- ▶ Broad range of possible shapes
- ▶ Basically the default style!

Literati



- ▶ Solitary, melancholy, bleak
- ▶ Trunk: bare, ruptured, calligraphic
- ▶ Pot: small to emphasise plant’s extravagant loneliness
- ▶ Style derived from woodcuts in classic Chinese drawing guide

Appendices

Miscellaneous Technical Notes

Repotting step-by-step

Regular repotting - often back into the same pot! - helps limit tree size via “root-to-shoot ratio”

1. Prepare pot

- ▶ Pick a (tentative) pot
- ▶ Scrub clean
- ▶ Staple mesh over holes
- ▶ Add guy wires

2. Prepare tree

- ▶ Remove from pot
- ▶ Clean off soil surface
- ▶ Dig down to expose nebari
- ▶ Choose “front” if not already clear
- ▶ Dig up / in to define root-ball

- ▶ Untangle lateral roots where poss. (esp. girdling roots)
- ▶ Clear any growth from lower trunk
- ▶ Spray with water if starting to dry!

3. Insert tree into pot

- ▶ Add shallow layer of soil to base
- ▶ Place root ball in pot and pack soil around
- ▶ Compress soil to “brownie” hardness
- ▶ Pull guy wires over root ball, twist pairs together tightly, and trim to 3-4 twists
- ▶ Cover with dried, grated, rehydrated sphagnum and compress surface
- ▶ Sprinkle with grated acrocarpous (upward-growing) moss

