

The 4th National Symposium on Australian Plants as Bonsai

Hosted by the Victorian Native Bonsai Club at the National Herbarium, Royal Victorian Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, on 11-12 April 2015

Well, what a great weekend it was, after all the preparation that went into this event.

Who was there?

Overall, more than 70 people attended the Symposium as official participants or presenters, representing clubs and organisations from Victoria, New South Wales, ACT, South Australia and Tasmania. Victorian participants came from Melbourne and several parts of country Victoria, and the representation was quite diverse and certainly enthusiastic.

Most attendees were there for the full weekend, with a small number attending for the Sunday only.

The Symposium Program

The two-day program was varied, with presentations on particular species groups, including rarely-used species, inspirations from nature in our region, possibilities for growing advanced stock for bonsai, demonstration plantings and styling of bonsai with local native species, a critique of selected bonsai specimens from the exhibition, a question and answer session, all combined with the exhibition as well as guided visits to the National Herbarium and the Botanic Gardens.

Presentations

With the theme of the Symposium being titled “Natives – A Victorian Perspective” the topics covered by presenters gave a great focus on the experience and the species which are particularly relevant to our part of the country, but which are also very relevant to other parts of Australia as well.

Quentin Valentine provided a slide presentation on coastal species and growth habits in Victoria, including especially Moonah and Coastal Tea Tree. The possibilities and opportunities which these species and their responses to environmental pressures inspire for bonsai development were given a great overview, which was followed up with demonstrations later in the program.

In Neil Padbury's presentation on growing of advanced stock, he discussed his experiences with field-grown stock, especially with Banksias, and his learning and successes in transplanting to containers for further development as bonsai. As he said, there is still wide scope for similar work across most of our native species.

Gavin Gostelow commenced with thoughts about the transition from Chinese and Japanese bonsai to Australian species, and then moved into a wide-ranging presentation on Acacias, as found in the wild across Australia, and as they could translate into bonsai using inspiration from the wild, as well as the natural growth characteristics of some of the many species available. Gavin's presentation included consideration of garden varieties, coastal and mountain species, and semi-arid species.

Kevin Ritchie presented a coverage of eucalypts as bonsai, with a particular emphasis on Victorian species and some others which are found as planted tree specimens in Victoria and elsewhere. Some of the possibilities for managing better crown, root and trunk development were discussed, as well as some of the challenges still to be resolved for some species in particular, especially around branch structures, leaf development, and lignotuber growth.

The Rarely-used Species session certainly presented a cross-section of experiences, challenges and results from a number of growers for a range of interesting species, including *Acacia papryocarpa*, *Araucaria cunninghamii*, *Acacia pinguifolia*, *Athrotaxis cupressoides*, *Nothofagus cunninghamii*, *Brachychiton* (various species), *Melaleuca ericifolia*, *Melia azedarach*, and *Araucaria bidwillii*.

A “Show, Tell and Ask” session generated discussion and questions from participants around a range of different topics, and while there were quite a few suggestions and solutions offered to some of the questions, it was also clear that there is still plenty of need for trials, experimentation and research on many species and growing techniques.

Demonstrations

The demonstrations focussed largely on Moonah (*Melaleuca lanceolata*) and Coastal Tea Tree (*Leptospermum laevigatum*), with a group planting of 7 Moonahs by Quentin Valentine in one demo, and then Sally Christmas, Marcela Ferreira, John Mackie and Barry Wood worked on styling separate trees under the coordination of Quentin in a group demonstration.

The workshop session was well attended with an interesting range of trees worked on by participants, with excellent advice and assistance provided by Quentin and others.

The Exhibition

Our exhibition was agreed by many as being one of the best exhibitions of bonsai, and especially native bonsai, to be seen. It attracted quite a range of bonsai enthusiasts, club members and the wider public, and certainly generated much discussion and interest. With 50 bonsai plants on display, covering a range of species including paperbarks, tea trees, eucalypts, acacias, and many others, it was an excellent display of the diversity and possibilities for Australian plants as bonsai, as achieved in Victoria especially. Domain House was a great venue, and the catalogue provided excellent information on each plant.

A Critique session for a number of plants selected from the exhibition display was conducted on the Sunday morning, led by Quentin, Neil and Gavin. This resulted in considerable animated discussion and debate about styles, presentation, training practices and future possibilities for the plants reviewed. It also gave some good ideas for everyone to take away for development of their own plants.

The Workers

And what a great job was done by all of the volunteer workers – setting up the hall and the exhibition, management of the exhibition, shifting of trees and equipment, and all of the other things which needed to be carried out. Without the willing and active support of all of the people who gave of their time and expertise, the Victorian Native Bonsai Club would not have been able to make this Symposium weekend such a success. Thanks to everyone!

And now?

The 5th National Symposium is to be held in Canberra on 27-28 February 2016. This next Symposium will continue build on the information developed from this 2015 event, and the previous events as well, and present further knowledge and experience of growers, providing an increasing range of information to help expand the use of Australian native species as Bonsai.