

Bonsai Project

Juniperus Chinensis 'Itoigawa'

Peter Foele
Started 2016

Positive points

- This is untrained (raw) material that has been developed in a specialist nursery in Japan. This means the foliage is relatively near to the trunk, allowing for a short period of development
- The length of the new growth indicates the tree is healthy and will recover quickly from styling
- The foliage type (naturally short scales) is much appreciated in the final image of a mature Bonsai.

Negative points

- The trunk and foliage mass feels slightly imbalanced, there is too much foliage for this trunk. The trunk also appears to be leaning too much to the right.
- There is a relatively poor root base on this tree, and the branches all sprout from the same side of the trunk (the right half and the back as seen from this side)



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- This is a variety of Chinese Juniper. Found growing naturally in the valley of the river Itoi, it has a compact and dense scale-type foliage that is easy to maintain. This makes it a very popular species for Bonsai.
- I acquired this tree in 2013. I left it to grow freely in my garden for the next 3 years - only food and water, no pruning or wiring - to observe the natural growth in the climate of my garden. This enabled me to define the most effective and expedient route to transform this plant into a nice looking Bonsai.
- The length, colour of foliage and strength of the new growth indicated that this tree is ready for first styling – an activity that may mean a significant stress for the tree (depending of the severity of styling) - so starting with a strong and healthy plant is adamant for a short recovery period, thus the possible shortest route to a mature Bonsai.
- It was used as demonstration plant at the Scottish Bonsai Association's exhibition on May 14th, 2016. During this demonstration I explained my preferred way of working with Bonsai – slow, steady and continuous.

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- This demonstration consisted of a 'first styling'. During this styling I only focus on determining the shape and character of the main branches – 1st generation (leaving the trunk) and 2nd generation (growing on the 1st generation branches). These branches are the ones that will stay on the tree regardless of future growth, and will be visible throughout the trees' life. On some occasions I find it useful to leave two or three possible future 'options' open during this 'first styling', but this tree offered me the possibility of determining my preferred final styling direction without the need to resorting to leaving other routes open.
- All branches where a severe bend was anticipated were wrapped in raffia. This is my preferred medium to protect branches, as it naturally deteriorates over the course of a few years. All other media (such as electricians' tape or self-amalgamating tape) may appear easier to apply, but is much more difficult to remove. In some cases it has to be cut away, which increases the risk of damage to branches when doing so. Such cut marks can be visible for a very long time – in some cases even remain visible on a permanent basis.
- The tree was wired using specialist Japanese copper wire. This wire is heat treated to allow for ease of application, but work-hardens very quickly. It also has the benefit of oxidizing close to the natural colour of the bark. Leaving it almost invisible for the time it remains on the tree.

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35y field grown starting
material

- Plenty of useful branches
with foliage close to trunk
- natural dead wood
present



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Before initial styling



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35y field grown starting
material



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After initial styling



Before styling



After first styling



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First styling

- By wiring the main branches and forcing them to grow in a downward position we lose the image of a young bush and an old tree starts to appear.
- Decide which branches can be used for the future design of the tree – At this stage it is wise to leave some of the unneeded branches and strip it from bark. This leaves the opportunity to create Jins – removal is always possible in the future
- Remove excessive branches/foliage
- Wire and shape primary branches –
note: the branches will need further developing.
Some will be shortened in future, while the top of the foliage needs to develop into a more dense crown



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- This tree had many options regarding styling. I chose a more classical form, as the trunk had – in my view – insufficient character to support a more dramatic form. This choice was driven by trying to find a visually pleasing balance between root-base, trunk line and positioning of branches.
- Tilting the trunk slightly to the left brought a more balanced feel to the tree. Tilting it further to the right would have hidden some of the root-base at the right-hand side of the trunk underneath the future soil level, while tilting it further to the left would have done the same on the left hand side. A balance had to be struck
- None of the branches were shortened during the demonstration. This choice was driven by a horticultural reasoning. Had I cut during the demonstration the remaining foliage – which had weaker growth than the tips – would have needed more time to grow to full strength. Waiting a little longer before cutting gives me stronger growth of the remaining foliage. The sap-flow coursing through the branch at the time of cutting would have been stronger, and the connection between the sap-vanes in the branch and the weaker growing inner foliage would have been better established.
- In other words, cutting too soon would have resulted in needing more time for future development of the foliage that will be used for more detailed styling.

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- The exact time of cutting is determined by the growth of the foliage closer to the trunk. Close observation throughout the growing season will indicate when the time for reducing the length of the branches has arrived.
- The next step in this phase of development will be the following:
 - 1) Cutting the branches that are overlong during this growing season (2016)
 - 2) Repotting of the tree to the correct angle in the same pot. This will be done when the tree starts growing in spring 2017
 - 3) Encouraging strong growth of the inner shoots on all the branches for the next 2-3 years. Doing this will provide me with many small shoots to wire, so that I can start the next phase in the styling of this tree (= more detailed styling of the individual branches)
- The wire that is used in this phase will be allowed to 'bite in'. I usually wait until the thickening of the branches has reached a point that the exposed bark in between the wires is reaching half the thickness of the wire (e.g. if wired with a 2mm wire the 'wire scar' has to be 1mm deep before I remove the wire).
- I do this so that the new growth is capable of taking over the function of the wire, i.e. countering the internal stresses caused by bending the branch.

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- This point can be reached within 1 to 2 years of strong growth. Since this is the first styling, I am not worried by the occurrence of the scarring, as the new growth that is needed to reach phase 2 and 3 of the development to mature Bonsai will easily heal over these scars, leaving only a fine, barely visible line once the tree is fully developed.
- Doing this allows me to have the tree fully mature, with branches capable of holding their shape and the weight of the foliage pads with a maximum of 3 wiring sessions.
- There is one danger with this method, and that is that this scar will leave a permanent weak line in the branch. It is therefore important to only allow this to happen when you are certain of the shape and character brought into the branch. Smaller adjustments will be possible in the future, but major changes in shape of branch will most likely result in unexpected breakage.
- Repotting will be done using the same pot, as I believe it will only be possible to determine the best fitting pot once the tree is further developed. Potting it in a good looking Bonsai pot at this stage will most likely result in a poor fit once the tree is more matured.
- The choice of pot shape and colour will determine the quality and visual appeal of your Bonsai. I am happy to hold back in putting the tree until it is further developed, so I can spend a bit more money on 'the most suitable pot' when the time is right.

Evolutionary overview



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