

SOME PLANTS ARE BORN ARCHITECTURAL, SOME HAVE ARCHITECTURE THRUST UPON THEM

An introduction to some amazing possibilities and the whole business of
Creative Maintenance (Part 1)

Palm Trees, Banana Plants, Agaves and Giant Rhubarbs are all naturally architectural - they have their own spectacular and instantly recognizable shape.

Lots of plants *don't* and if you like spectacular shapes (we do) then you might be tempted to copy us. We go up to a plant and wag an accusing finger at it and say "Okay plant - you look fairly interesting but is there anything we can do to you to make you look even *more* interesting?"

The next stage could be turning the plant into a ball or a cone or a lollipop. This is topiary and something we're all familiar with. Here we are trying to suggest something more subtle, often borrowing ideas from nature - merely accentuating the positive.



This old Maple has had its top clipped and its middle tidied. It might look natural, but it's not.

The look of a tree can often be improved by raising the crown (removing lower branches to draw attention to the trunk or trunks), thinning the centre (drawing attention to the tracery of lower branches) and clipping the profile (giving the entire tree a more sculptural and eye-catching look).



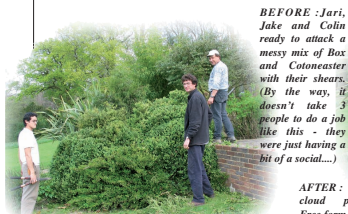
An authentic Japanese 'Niwaki' using Japanese Holly (Ilex crenata). This tree is over 3 metres tall and about 60 years old and was grown in Japan.

An Anglo-Japanese 'Niwaki' using the Green Olive (Phillyrea latifolia). This was transformed from a naturally grown tree to its present state over a period of less than three years.



In Japan, there's a long history of sculpting trees to look like miniatures. These are called **Niwaki** ('Garden Tree') and are grown in the ground (as opposed to **Bonsai** - which are grown in containers). Growing these is pretty advanced stuff but we have developed a kind of Anglo-Japanese version that, with a good eye and an understanding of the way things grow, is within anyone's reach.

Cloud pruning is an expression used to describe free-form clipping. This is a long established tradition in English gardening - particularly with Yew. Great billowing cloud-like hedges can be seen in many ancient gardens - usually owned by The National Trust as they're the only ones who can afford the up keep.



BEFORE :Jari, Jake and Colin ready to attack a messy mix of Box and Cotoneaster with their shears. (By the way, it doesn't take 3 people to do a job like this - they were just having a bit of a social....)

AFTER : shapely cloud pruning. Free form sculptural shapes.



This was a brilliant solution to a nasty problem. We'd made the mistake of planting a rampant dwarf (Pleioblastus distichus) under a palm tree. It looked dreadful and we couldn't get rid of it - so now we clip it in the Japanese style (Cloud Pruning). It looks good all year round and you can change the shapes whenever you feel like it.



Even some plants with a naturally strong shape can be enhanced by clever use of secateurs to draw attention to a strong shape that otherwise would be obstructed by old leaves and extraneous growth. We coined the expression '**Brown Biting**' (removal of BROWN BITS) to describe this process but so many people mispronounced this as 'Brown Biting' with a look of such utter puzzlement (and why not?) that the expression has fallen into disuse.....shame really, I rather liked it.

For the last word on this subject :
www.treeshapers.com

A Yucca reduced to its bare bones - displaying its amazing shape after removal of all old leaves and extraneous growth



TREE TRUNKS AREN'T LIKE TOOTHPASTE

Addressing some common botanical misunderstandings with a little insight into how trees grow and what this has to do with babies and bicycle pumps



A Variegated Cloud Tree (*Ligustrum lucidum* 'Superbum') in the nursery. The trunk is about 2 metres tall.

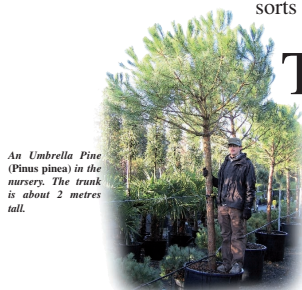
We've been selling plants for 15 years and we know that the way plants grow causes a lot of confusion - partly, we suspect, because it's counter intuitive; it's entirely unlike the way people and animals grow. We're all familiar with the process that allows a baby to become an adult - it's a bit like attaching a bicycle pump to a baby and pumping it up. Yes, the branches (the arms) *do* go 'up' and the head *does* stay (more or less) the same size but this process is absolutely *nothing* like the way trees grow.

Trying to imagine what a little plant in a pot is going to look like in five or ten years time is difficult enough, but the idea that a stick with leaves on, stuck in a pot, is one day going to be a big beautiful shapely tree is almost impossible. Here we try to help with this feat of imagination.



A variegated Cloud Tree (posh name: *Ligustrum lucidum* 'Superbum') after 15 years. The height of the trunk is the same as the ones in the nursery - about 2 metres (and to understand the significance of that remark I'm afraid you're going to have to read the text)

For a tree to look 'right' when semi-mature it needs a trunk of about 2 metres - so you can stand comfortably underneath it. This means that a tree in a pot on the nursery, is - we admit it - going to look fairly unlike its eventual self. As with any plant in a container, the roots are being restricted and to keep the thing happy, the foliage must necessarily be restricted too. That's why a tree in a pot in a nursery always has a head that looks 'too small' and a trunk that looks 'too tall'. And this leads to all sorts of terrible misunderstandings.....



An Umbrella Pine (*Pinus pinaster*) in the nursery. The trunk is about 2 metres tall.

The biggest misunderstanding concerns the relationship between the growth of the trunk and the growth of the head. This is where the toothpaste comes in. The comments are on the lines of : "I'm not buying that, it looks silly - a stick with a few leaves on the top and once it's grown it'll look even sillier with an even taller trunk and the head's still the same size".

"Ah!" we think to

ourselves (but don't actually say) "you think the trunk oozes out of the ground like toothpaste coming out of a tube, getting taller and taller and just to add insult to injury, the head never gets any bigger. Don't you?" We then wrap ourselves up in confusion desperately trying to tell you, as politely as possible, that you are wrong. Terribly wrong. Probably as

wrong as you ever have been in your entire life.



An Umbrella Pine (*Pinus pinaster*) in the ground after about 2 years. The trunk is still about 2 metres tall but you can see the extra growth on the head.



An Umbrella Pine (*Pinus pinaster*) in the ground after about 15 years. The trunk is now about 3 metres tall - but that's because the lower branches have been cut off! (common practice with this particular tree)



An Evergreen Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) in the nursery. The trunk is about 2 metres tall.

The branches on a tree - any tree - don't go 'up'. They stay in exactly the same place for their entire life. They certainly get thicker (as does the trunk), but they never move. All woody plants grow from their tips and each year they put on an extra layer of thickness on their trunks and branches. This is what creates annular rings on timber - otherwise known as its 'grain'.

With thanks to Jari Eikenaar - our resident tree man and model



An Evergreen Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) in the ground after 10 years. The trunk is still about 2 metres tall but look how broad the head is now.

GRASS, COMPETITION AND CONSTIPATION

How fast does it grow?

or

Why it's more than a little important to surround your newly planted specimens with virgin soil

When we're selling plants, one of the most frequently asked questions is "How fast will it grow?" A perfectly reasonable question that we'll throw back at you with - "It depends on how nice you are to it". Geographical location, rainfall and soil conditions all play a vital role in the development of plants but there's one thing that can be done that has an enormous effect on growth rate. It's extraordinarily simple and extraordinarily rarely done. **Just make sure there's no grass anywhere near it.** The truly awesome power of grass to constipate the development of trees

cannot be better illustrated than by 'The Parable of The Two Gum Trees' below.



If $\pi r^2 h$ = The Volume of a Cylinder, we have calculated that the volume of the Eucalyptus tree on the left is 17½ times greater than the one on the right.

That means (we reckon) that the one on the left has grown 17½ times faster than the one on the right and that's funny because they were both planted at exactly the same time. Why's that then?

The Eucalyptus on the left was planted in 1990 in well prepared soil with no competition from grass or weeds. The Eucalyptus on the right was planted as one of an avenue and was always surrounded by grass. After 5 years the one on the left was magnificent for such a young tree but the one in the avenue looked thin and straggly - a long stick of nonsense. The reason's so simple - it's all down to the grass. It's a highly successful plant that has the ability to stunt the growth of even the most vigorous plants. Terribly obvious but so often over-looked.



It should be pointed out that these 'How fast will it grow' conversations are nearly always about trees and bamboos - especially when they're being used as screening. But the constipating effect of any plants (particularly grass) near newly planted ones is always enormous and often under-estimated.

Plant a bamboo in the middle of a lawn, allow the grass to grow amongst it and three years later, expect the bamboo to be exactly the same size as when you planted it. I know - I've done it.



This sad looking thing is an Azalea I planted in 1982. It's always been surrounded by grass, it's still alive and I'm not convinced it's grown at all in nearly 25 years.

Trees grown surrounded by grass will *eventually* establish. The Eucalyptus, above right, looked good by the time this photo was taken but it looked horrible for its first ten years. If a tree is being planted in the middle of a lawn, the next question is "How far round the tree should I keep the grass away?" In an ideal world, 1 metre. This means a bed 2 metres across, with a tiny little tree stuck in the middle, looking damned silly. It might look damned silly but, believe us, it's well worth it. After 10 years, the roots will be well established and the presence of grass round the base will have become irrelevant.



This little Daphniphyllum is a slow growing tree at the best of times but is doing well here with its nice big clear bed surrounding it.

THE TRICKY BUSINESS OF GROWING PLANTS IN POTS

It just ain't natural. Plants grow in the ground.



Ligustrum lucidum 'superbum'. In rude health and in the ground. Where it belongs.

If you ever needed evidence that plants are happier in the ground than in a pot, take a look at these two specimens. They're the same plant and the same age. The one on the left has wonderful dense foliage and a stout trunk, the one on the right has neither. If you're ever in Horsham – go and have a look. They're both in the Carfax and the difference is striking.



Ligustrum lucidum 'superbum'. Utterly miserable and in a pot. It's the same age as the one on the left.

So – if you want to grow a plant in a pot what can you do? Here's a choice of five things that we hope will help:

1. Lower your expectations. If you believe what the telly people and the glossy magazine people tell you, you'd be forgiven for thinking that plants are just as happy in a pot as in the ground. Piffle. You can leave a plant in a pot for a bit but eventually it'll be miserable and will need to go in the ground – preferably *before* it begins to look miserable, not *after*.

2. Prune the roots and shape the foliage. Make sure the pot you use is tapered, so the plant can be removed from the pot. Pots that curve in at the top are mad – you can only remove the pot with a sledge hammer! Crude root pruning can be done with a carving knife (ask us for gory details). Shaping the foliage means you keep a good shape but also keep the plant at a size which is in proportion to the captive roots – (again, ask us for details if you don't get this bit).



This sad half dead looking thing isn't an unfamiliar sight is it?

3. Do it properly. Use the Versailles principle. Good old André Le Nôtre (Louis XIV's gardener at Versailles Palace) figured it all out with consummate skill and understanding in about 1670. You grow the plants in pots with removable sides and every few years you take the sides off, remove all the dead old roots and spent compost and replace it with lovely new stuff. Joel Cotin (the present head gardener at Versailles) reckons that by using this method a plant, if really well tended, could last over 100 years in a container.

So if this is such a great idea why is it so rarely done?

We wondered about this too and eventually – with great sadness – realised. Can't be bovvered. (If you *can* be bothered – ask us for riveting details – it's a very clever idea.



If you know what you're doing, plants can look good in a pot for quite a long time. Guess where this was taken.

4. Take our advice. Some plants are much more accommodating about being stuck in a pot than others and we can give you a lot of guidance on this subject. You might find what we say inconvenient but we still think it's good advice.

5. Don't do it – put the poor thing in the ground – hire a kango.

Of the problems we have with customers and their plants, 90% are related to plants in pots and we're heartily sick of the whole thing (does it show?)

We're often told that a plant must grow in a pot because the place where the plant is required is

concreted over. Talk to us about hiring a kango to make a hole – a *much* better solution. Please, please remember that growing a plant in a pot is an unnatural act. It's a slow death. If you live on the 14th floor of a skyscraper, you have no choice so let's have an intelligent conversation about it. Otherwise – is it really necessary?



These three pictures demonstrate the brilliant but little-used Versailles principle. The pot has removable sides so the old dead roots can be removed and fresh compost can be introduced. As a result, you can keep a plant happy in a pot for longer than by any other method.



THE GOLDEN RULES OF PLANTING

So much confusion. Ask ten different people and you'll be told ten different things. We *do* sympathise but here's a summary of what, over many years of planting we've learned are :

1. VITAL 2. OKAY 3. MAD

(It's all common sense but, providing you're not too far away, we can always plant, guarantee and maintain the plants for you)

VITAL

Plant High

Most people have clay soil that can lay wet all winter and rot roots. Plant high, mounding the soil up round the root ball and the plant has a much greater chance of success - it's got something light and well drained to root in to.
If you have beautifully well drained soil this may not be necessary - but it usually is.

Surround with a large area, clear of grass or weeds

See adjoining rant No:3 for more on this important business of avoiding competition.

Use mulch

This is mulch from a mulching machine - not spent mushroom compost or green waste from the local tip. Buy in bulk (not bags, too expensive) and be generous. The bacteria break it down, the worms assimilate it into the soil. The maximum effect for the minimum work and the plants love it.
Try your local tree surgeon for a supply.

If you use extra compost, don't put any under the root ball

This can cause the rootball to sink which is the equivalent of planting low. If soil is too deep round the base of a woody plant, the bark will rot.
This is the same as a rabbit ring-barking it. It will die.

Stake or guy really, really well

This is the thing people have the greatest trouble with. Not unsurprisingly, we have a lot to say on the subject.
Whether to guy or to stake? How many stakes? How to stake? This needs a discussion with us - please ask.

Protect from rabbits, deer and anything else that attacks plants

Visit our stock field and see how we do it - or ask for advice. Easier than the staking but just as important.

Don't over water

People always worry about how much to water but it's not as hard as people think. In our experience more plants are killed by *over* watering than *under* watering. If they have too little water, they can drop their leaves and wait. If they're sitting in a bog, all they can do is have their roots rotted and die. Bamboos and some herbaceous plants often benefit from plenty of water but most of our plants come from parts of the world with long dry summers and once established* they NEVER need watering. There's a common expression in horticulture - '*Killed by kindness*.'

**some fast growing plants do need lots of water to get established - Acacia and Eucalyptus come to mind*

OKAY

Planting with extra peat or compost

Why? What's the point? We do this very rarely - usually only when specifically asked to. Plants have got to make a go in whatever soil they're in. A bag of peat isn't going to make much difference is it? However, we DO use masses of mulch and let the bacteria and the worms do their work..

Using those watering tubes

Some people are very keen on these tubes that you pour water down to get to the roots. They're probably marvellous but we never use them and feel the way we do it is perfectly adequate.

Feeding

When customers ask - '*Shall I feed it?*' we usually say '*No*'. It's sometimes another case of '*Killed by kindness*'. We've all done it. "*I paid a lot of money for you so I'm going to be terribly nice to you and give you lots of water and lots of food. And kill you*". Unless you're on very poor sandy or chalky soil, just obey our other rules, don't feed, and you'll begin to realise that, with a bit of common sense, killing plants isn't easy, it's extremely difficult.

MAD

Using that plastic woven membrane stuff to suppress weeds

A layer of plastic over your soil means you can never improve the soil with organic mulch and you can never see what your soil's like. It look hideous (it's often covered in bark chips which blow around exposing areas of tatty looking plastic), it doesn't let all the rain through so it either directs too much water into or away from a rootball (depending on whether the plant is planted high or low) and it certainly doesn't suppress weeds as they can root through the membrane given a chance. If you want to control weeds, use a good old fashioned hoe.

Torturing your plants in pots

See adjoining rant No:4 for more on this thorny subject.
