

AUSTRALIAN TEATREES STYLING FOR BONSAI

With case-studies from Tasmania

(This is an amended version of a presentation made at a symposium on styling with Australian trees, held in conjunction with the 8th National Exhibition of Australian Native Plants as Bonsai, at the Australian National Botanic Gardens, Canberra on March 19-20th, 2011).

The genus *Leptospermum* (Teatree) is represented by over 80 species in Australia, with a handful occurring in New Guinea, Indonesia and Borneo. One species, *Leptospermum scoparium* also occurs



in New Zealand. It was this species that some of Captain Cook's sailors used to make tea, hoping it would keep scurvy at bay, and from here, the common name of teatree originated.

Teatrees have a wide range in Australia, occurring from tropical to cool temperate zones, and from rainforests to the semi-arid areas. In Tasmania, as in much of Australia, they can be found from front-line coastal communities to mountain tops. However most sites where teatrees grow, are moist, or have regular periods of wetness; for example, on the edge of water holes or creeks that might dry up, but are regularly filled with water for some of the year. They are generally found as shrubs, but quite a few species can grow into small to medium trees.

This photo is a close-up of the flowers of Tasmania's, *Leptospermum nitidum* (Shiny Teatree). It occurs in

western and southern Tasmania.

Some species are very specific to habitat, such as the stupendously sculptural coast teatree, *Leptospermum laevigatum*, which occurs naturally only on coastal sand dunes and cliffs. In contrast, *Leptospermum lanigerum*, the woolly teatree, is widespread in its distribution across four states, NSW, Vic, Tas and SA.

For every species out there, there would be at least, on average, about three differing forms one could cultivate. These forms might vary in growth habit, such as spreading rather than upright, or pink flowers rather than white. (*The afore mentioned woolly teatree is quite variable across the country side, and three or four forms are regularly cultivated at Plants of Tasmania Nursery near Hobart*). Three forms, multiplied by 80 species, equals 240 forms of teatree, ready and waiting for bonsai!

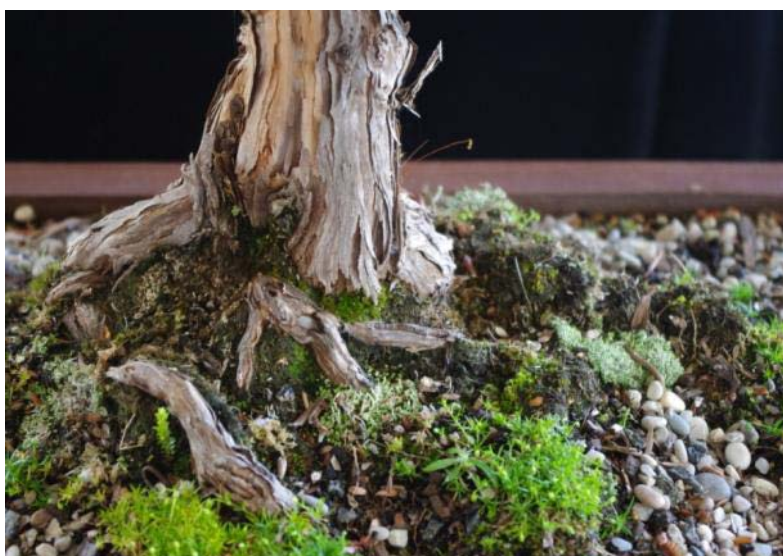
With our Tasmanian *Leptospermum* (8 species in total), I've worked with seven species covering about 16 forms, so that leaves only another 200 Australian forms for me to try!

But what does *Leptospermum* look like in the wild? Well with 80 species I can assure you there will be some differences, but also much commonality.

But before we explore the wild and free teatree, let us look at their attributes for bonsai, and the horticulture required to propagate and cultivate them successfully in captivity.

Leptospermum ~ attributes for bonsai

1. Bark - very striking, even on relatively young trees. Often flakey, papery or fibrous
2. Trunk – often develops over time with a ropey appearance (muscles!) Very striking
3. Generally adapt well to pot culture
 - reliable as a potted plant
 - branches wire well when young (thus being adaptable to many styles)
 - will often shoot back from older wood
 - usually healthy (but watch out for scale and the ensuing sooty mould)
4. Small leaves, flowers and fruit (as a woody capsule), so nicely in scale for bonsai
5. Can develop an aged look, when relatively young (courtesy of bark and trunk)
6. Flowers are very showy (and are now available in a myriad of designer colours)
7. The woody seed capsules can also be very ornamental

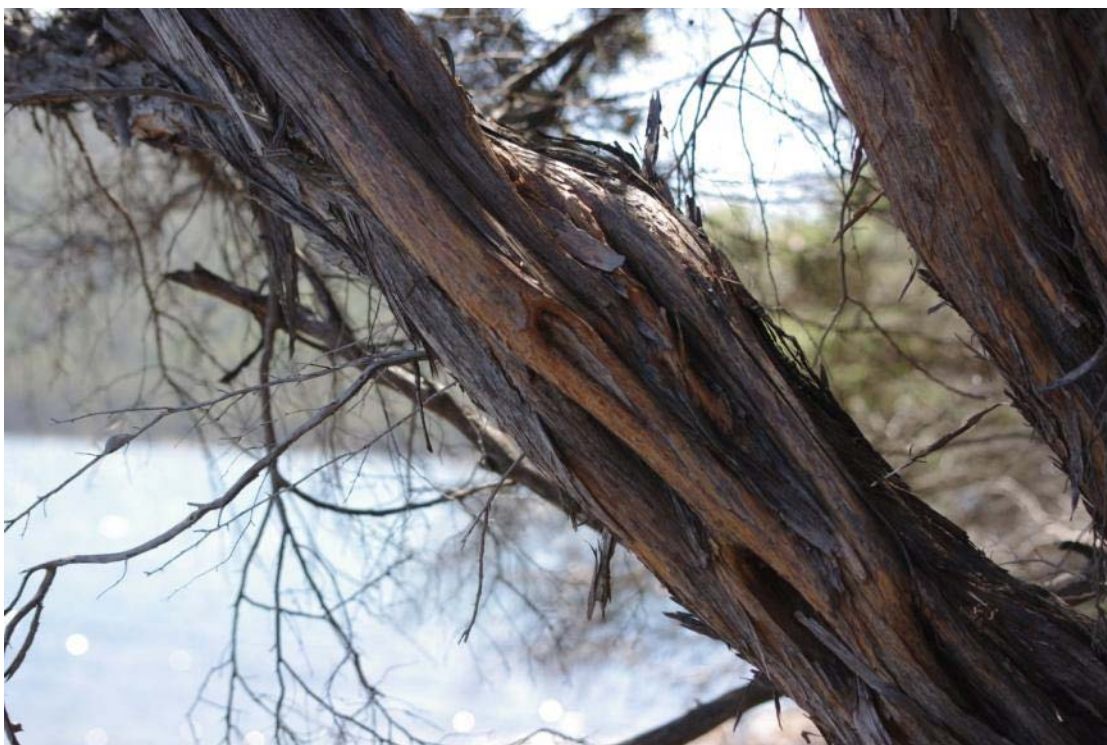


Flakey bark on the base of a 20 year-old Woolly Teatree bonsai.

Notice how the bark continues onto the roots!

In my mind, a great nebari.

This tree is really well anchored to the ground, and although you can't quite see it in this photo, the trunk (approx 50 mm across) has an excellent taper.



The ropey trunk on a Smokey Teatree (*Leptospermum glaucescens*), Tasman Peninsula.

Leptospermum ~ propagation and cultivation

Seed

Teatrees produce a prolific amount of seed. It is easily collected and easily germinated. The woody seed capsules on most species, stay closed, and on the tree for many years, but some, such as the coast teatree, shed their seed when the fruits are mature. This may be six months after flowering.

Probably the main problem in growing teatrees from seed, is the almost overwhelming urge to sow the seed too thickly, thus germinating a veritable lawn of soft-leaved baby seedlings, which are then very prone to death from fungus attack. (This is known as damping-off)

Collected, unopened seed capsules, when placed in a closed paper bag on the window sill, will soon dry out, and open to release hundreds if not thousands of tiny, black, slender seeds. (*Leptospermum* = *leptos*: thin, slender, and *sperma*: seed). You can sow these seeds by sprinkling them sparsely over a punnet, pot or tray of propagating mix, then keeping moist till germination, which may be anything from 10 days to 4 weeks, depending on the species and temperature at the time. The safest time to grow from seed is spring. When the seedlings are about a centimetre tall, carefully transplant them into fertilised potting mix in 75mm tubes or similar. At this stage, thinking bonsai, you may be able to spread out the top section of their tiny roots, with dreams of a good nebari ahead!

Cuttings

Many teatrees will grow quite easily from cuttings, especially with bottom heat and misting to keep the leaves from drying out whilst they grow roots. Firm young growth usually gives best results. Cuttings are ideal if you are keen to replicate the plant you are admiring. For example, if amongst a whole bunch of plants, you find one with extra tiny leaves and a nice compact habit, propagation from cuttings will give you an identical plant, whereas from seed, you will most likely end up with a range of plants. It will then take a number of years to determine each plant's attributes.

Layering

For bonsai enthusiasts, most of whom venerate age (with the plants at any rate), we generally are impatient to have old looking plants, but quickly! Layering of existing, mature plants allows us the chance to do just that. One can bend a low branch down to the ground or wrap moisture holding material around a branch, and possibly within a year have a well-girthed starter bonsai.

Collection of in-ground plants

Not actually propagation, but still a means to establish a plant in a pot, digging one from the ground is certainly possible, but unless done carefully, can be fatal. (For the plant, less often the collector) Collected plants (yamadori in Japan), was originally the main source for bonsai in China and Japan, but now, with a world covered in people, and less covered by wild plants, **we should be leaving our wild plants in their natural habitat, and admiring them there.**

Exceptions, are digging plants from your garden, or from places where bulldozers are just about to strike. If this is the case, then there is definite chance of success (maybe 50/50), depending on favourable circumstances. Favourable circumstances are:

- the plant is not too big or too old (say less than 3m and less than 20 yrs)
- the ground is not a dry soil (in dry soils, the feeder roots will be too far out)
- it is not mid-summer (the cooler and moister the season, the better)
- the plant has lots of feeder roots near to the trunk (often pure chance)
- you take maximum roots, and prune off most of the foliage; say 90%
- you keep the roots and foliage moist till you get home
- you keep it in a shady, protected site for a month or two, with regular water or misting
- you chant incantations at dawn

Collected *Leptospermum* are probably more likely to survive, than some other genera, due to their propensity to grow in moister sites, and their ability to grow new leaves from trunk or branches.

Pot cultivation

Teatrees generally grow very well, in a standard potting mix, with low phosphorous fertilizers. To grow them quickly, pot them on regularly (say every 6 months if they are growing vigorously), and trim to keep them bushy and/or wire them, to get some movement in the trunk.

I have found Teatrees to be quite hardy as a pot plant, and certainly no more difficult than a whole range of Australian species, of which most are no real trouble at all.

Most species are hardy to pests and diseases, but beware the brightly flowering Lept. Scoparium hybrids, as they are very prone to scale and some other pests. Scale is the most likely problem I encounter with my bonsai teatree, with the ensuing sooty mould, being unsightly. Check your teatrees regularly for pests and disease, as you should with all your bonsai. At the first sign of scale or sooty mould, either remove the scale by hand and/or spray with white oil.

Tasmanian Leptospermum in the WILD

So that's the genus Leptospermum, over 80 species Australia-wide, hundreds of different forms and occurring all over the place. In Tasmania we have eight species and one variety. They are:

- Leptospermum glaucescens* **Smoky Teatree** – coastal and Tasmania wide
- L. grandiflorum* **Autumn Teatree** – central east coast
- L. Laevigatum* **Coast Teatree** – coastal and widespread
- L. lanigerum* **Woolly Teatree** - widespread
- L. nitidum* **Shiny Teatree** - southern rivers
- L. riparium* **River Teatree** – west and central highlands
- L. rupestre* **Mountain Teatree** – mountain areas
- L. scoparium* **Common Teatree** (also Manuka) - widespread
- L. scoparium* var. *eximium* **Common Broadleaf Teatree** - coastal

But what do they look like? Well, for a start, in Tasmania they all flower white!

But how do they appear as a component of the landscape? And how do we capture that appearance in our bonsai? Until taking on this exercise, I too, hadn't really studied the teatrees that I was bonsaiing. I was making most of it up. Bonsai, the *imagination* tree! (and thanks to a Victorian nursery for that quote) So for me it's really been, "Teatree the imagination tree!"

So, I said to myself, just nip out on a few photo taking trips, I know there's hundreds of thousands of teatree out there, I know roughly where they are, I'll come back with heaps of tremendous, inspiring photos!

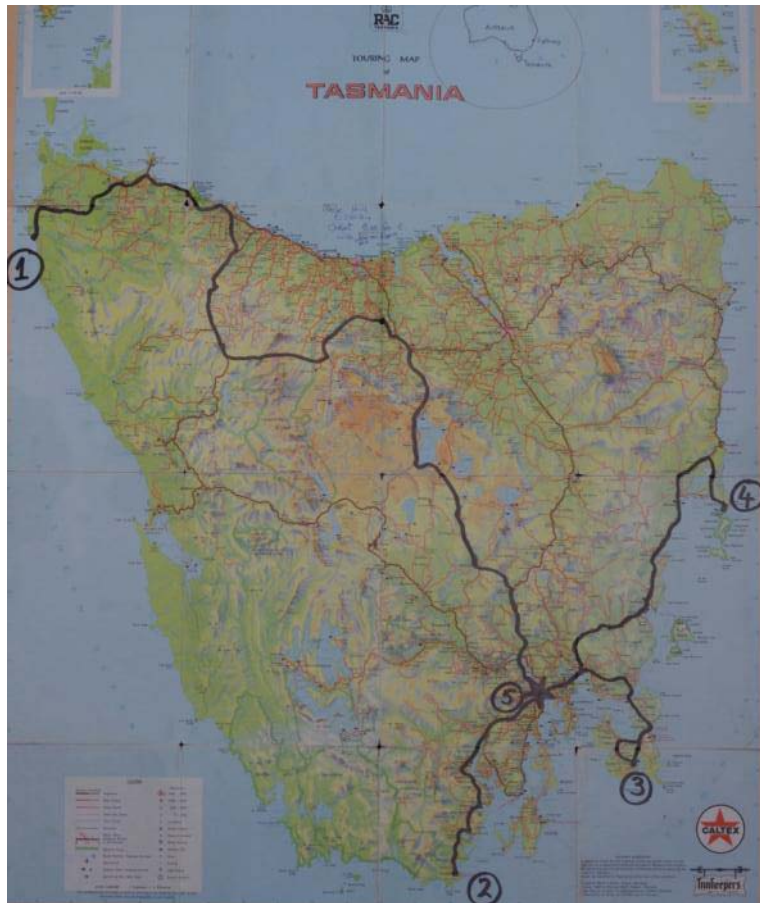
Well, guess what? There were hundreds of thousands of them out there, but no-one had bothered to arrange them neatly, ready for the superb photography that I was all ready for! They were all mixed up together, either with themselves or in cahoots with other species. They were either too young, or too ugly or too messy!

Actually, what they were, was very much part of the Australian bush! Many were in almost pure stands, in thickets great or small, and I realised that this indeed is one very valid way of displaying these species.

I enjoy forest settings. You can get a great feeling of perspective from a forest setting. A forest though, conjures up thoughts of tall trees, whereas with teatree it's more like tall shrubs, so perhaps it's a thicket setting. And one of the beauties of a thicket setting, is that you don't need very mature trees to give you a delightful effect, you just need a few of them!

I embarked on **five** teatree-finding excursions. The first, was the longest, to the far NW corner of the island, in search of Tasmanian examples of *Leptospermum laevegatum*, the coast teatree.

Key to map: 1. Arthur River 2. Cockle Creek 3. Tasman peninsula
 4. Freycinet National Park 5. Mt. Wellington



On the way I drove over the central highlands, and past Cradle Mountain, where I found the mountain teatree (*Leptospermum rupestre*), which can occur as a prostrate plant, otherwise a bushy, medium to tall shrub, the woolly teatree (*Leptospermum lanigerum*), which covers extensive areas in wet soils and can grow to 15m or more, and the shiny teatree (*Leptospermum nitidum*), a slow growing shrub, usually to only 2-3m.



The photo above (Cradle Mtn National Park) shows the wonderfully twisted, flakey-barked stems of a shrubby form of the Mountain Teatree, *Leptospermum rupestre*. These stems belonged to only one or two shrubs as far as I could tell. The whole shrubbery was about 2m high, with a spread of about 3m. However the outside of this shrubbery looked completely different (see photo below).

As you can see, the mountain teatree is often found as a multi-branched shrub, with the foliage enveloping the shrub but not very thickly.



The woolly teatree is often found in dense thickets. Its grey-green or bluish foliage is upright, dense and strongly growing when young, but older specimens do begin to round off, and fairly loose, distinct foliage pads can develop.



The Woolly Teatree, *Leptospermum lanigerum* (left) occurs all over Tasmania, mainly in wet areas (which is half of Tassie!). It can grow to 20-30 metres high in the forests. In this semi-mature specimen (5m), you can see the foliage beginning to form fairly loose pads. In this species, they will not form tight neat pads, tending more to an open, more relaxed style.....the countenance of much of Australia's flora.

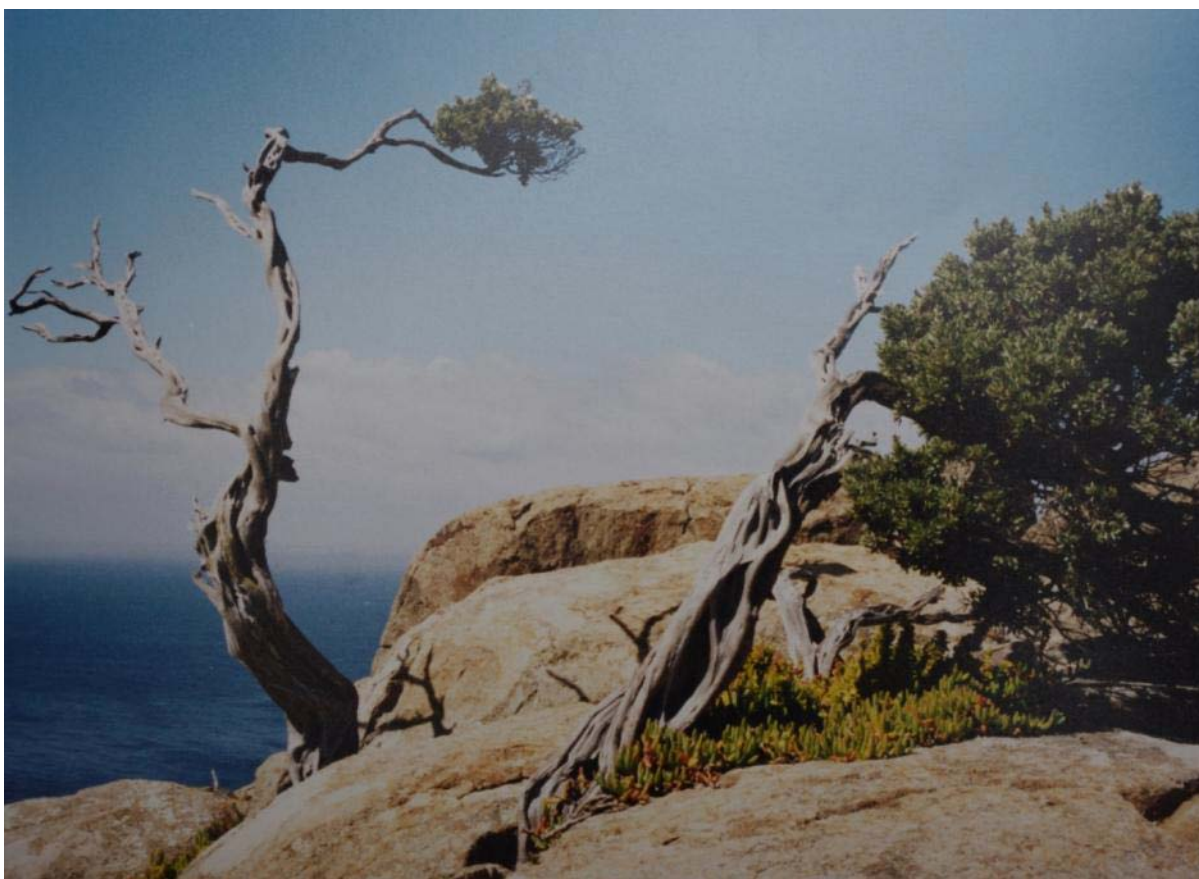
On the north of the west coast, amongst smoky teatrees and common teatrees, I found the coast tea tree, *Leptospermum laevegatum*, (picture below) but the Tasmanian versions don't appear to develop into the huge, amazingly ropey, twisted-trunked specimens that occur on the mainland.



My second trip was due south to the SE corner of the state, to Cockle Creek, the end point of the popular south coast epic walking track. Here was, once again, the ubiquitous woolly teatree, more smoky teatrees and also the common teatree. Near here at Recherche Bay, is recorded a historical contact between Tasmanian aboriginal people and Europeans in 1793, in this case the French. It is recorded as a convivial meeting, with mutual respect from both cultures.

Trip number three was to the Tasman Peninsula, which is east then south of Hobart. Port Arthur is down here. More importantly, there are some fine teatrees. It is a stronghold for a coastal form of the common teatree, *Leptospermum scoparium var eximium*. This shrub has a broader leaf (thus the common name, broadleaf common teatree), and is a brighter green than the common teatree. It is also more dense in its growth habit.

Out on Cape Pillar, a high plateau of dolerite rock, jutting defiantly out into the southern ocean, is a plethora of beautiful plants, some extremely windblown. The cape is raked by lashing gales and has a high rainfall, but if you walk there on a good day, it is botanically delightful and scenically astounding!



Right at the tip of the cape, hundreds of metres above frolicking seals, and with a view towards Antarctica, a few hardy teatrees have lived a long and scenic life. Only a couple of metres high, but with trunks that attest to their long life, these *Leptospermum scoparium var eximium* (Broadleaf Common Teatree), still maintain healthy terminal clumps of foliage. Literati meets *Leptospermum*! This shrub is available in native plant nurseries in Tas, and makes a fine bonsai.

There is a wonderful variety of habitats on Cape Pillar. The super-prostrate shrubs on wind-swept Hurricane Heath cling to terra firma as though their life depended on it (which it does), yet not far away, in a more sheltered zone, one can walk through a winding pathway, bounded by the flaky, grey-barked, sensuous trunks of the smoky teatree. (See photos below)



These last three photos, all on Cape Pillar, illustrate the variety in plant growth that occurs in nature. The sparse, sculptural forms on the cliff edge, equate in bonsai, to the Japanese literati. The wind affected, ground-hugging shrubs are easily likened to inspiration for a semi-cascade, or windswept style, whereas the lithe, sinuous trunks along the walking track, turns ones mind to a lovely group setting.

The challenge then, for those of us who are desiring to have our indigenous bonsai remind us of our wonderful wild plants, is to capture that look.

Up the east coast of Tasmania are two species of teatree that don't seem to need a lot of water. My fourth trip was in search of one of these, *Leptospermum grandiflorum*, the Autumn Teatree. And on the granitic sands of the beautiful Freycinet Peninsular, I found them in abundance. Most obvious was the smoky teatree, with its small flowers and soft, small seed capsules, then there was the autumn teatree with larger bluish leaves and both larger flowers and seed capsules. I knew that if I scaled some of the huge sloping expanses of granite, on the Hazards range, I would find bonsai-like specimens of a number of species, growing out of the cracks and crevices. *Kunzea ambigua* was abundant, but also plenty of autumn teatree. (Photo below)



I left the local trip to last. A drive to the top of Mt Wellington on a day when the temperature at 1500m altitude was virtually the same as Hobart, both in the early 20's, was a rare treat. I took a jumper off! Usually you put another five on!

The dominant teatree till about 1000m up, was the woolly teatree (Surprise, surprise!). At the higher altitudes, these shrubs were shorter and the foliage pads more rounded. After some hundreds of metres gain in altitude and an absence of *Leptospermum*, I parked at the summit carpark amongst a plethora of foreign accented, hire-car driving visitors, and happily wandered around an amazing alpine rock garden. And whilst everyone else was oohing and ahing at the distant coastal vistas, I remained steadfastly gazing at the ground! The mountain teatree, *Leptospermum rupestre*, is in its element in this most inhospitable of settings. A week ago, just as February was bidding us farewell, snow was pelting down and the temperature was minus two!

Up here, a particular form of the mountain teatree has flourished. It is genetically disposed to lying around, and it does so with health and vigour. It is an ideal plant for a cascade style of bonsai, and its rock-hugging ability is undisputed. It is the same species that I photographed near Cradle Mtn, yet its form is completely different. (Photos below)



(These flat-as-a-carpet forms of the mountain teatree remind me of my favourite prostrate form of *Leptospermum scoparium*, which originated from plants on the NW coast. We called it "Jims Rocky Rambler" (in honour of Jim finding it), and it develops a gnarly procumbent trunk at an early age, with robust dark green foliage and pure white flowers).



So you can see that even with the limited number of species that I work with in Tasmania, there is a good variety to play with, and it is very interesting to search out these plants in the wild and see what they get up to. You can then craft your bonsai if you wish, to evoke that natural wildness.

Musing on the wild countenance of the teatree

As is often the case with many other trees, the teatrees I came accross in Tasmania that were of a reasonable age, or those that were growing slowly, were tending to round off in the foliage outline. They had the rounded countenance of middle age perhaps. Old ones were few and far between however. It seems that many teatree communities are part of the progression to mature forest, and as the trees grow through and above them, they die out. Old trees on their own, were certainly not common.

Generally though, these mature rounded outlines are not terribly neat. There tends to be a somewhat open countenance and some fraying at the edges on top of the foliage pads. In my mind it's that casual Australian expression of foliage, that is so typical of our dry sclerophyll forest and bush-land. Compared with many densely foliated northern hemisphere trees, many of our trees and shrubs have a relatively open canopy.....it lets the light through.

Quite often, the entire foliage head, which at a cursory glance appears as one predominant shape, is actually composed of many smaller heads, all of which may be somewhat open and somewhat frayed at the edges. In fact, somewhat casual, shall we say.

Styling teatree for bonsai

If you wish to style your teatree as a bonsai, to reflect the species in the wild or the ecosystem from whence it came, you need to observe the species (or close relatives) in its natural state. There is nothing better than actually going there (include it in your holidays), and by observing, and by taking photos or making quick notes or sketches, become familiar with that species.

Of course, many teatrees sold commercially these days, have been bred from nursery stock, away from the wild, and exact replicas of these mass produced plants may not actually occur in nature. However, look to the parents or near relatives of the species, and you should get some idea.

Also, some species may be very hard to find, so unless you make it a sacred pilgrimage, you may have to resort to photos.

And then of course, you can always fall back on “bonsai the imagination tree”! But even here, you can imagine in the Australian way! It is just a matter of reading less northern hemisphere bonsai books, taking less notice of native plants styled to look like traditional bonsai, and spending more time observing and photographing our local flora, and gradually you may find yourself becoming infused with the images of wild Australia, then transcribing these images to your bonsai.

On the following pages are some images of Tasmanian teatrees I have as bonsai. After spending several months traversing Tasmania, and observing this genera, I am expecting that I will now make changes to many of these plants. It’s a learning life.



This Woolly Teatree reminds me of some I saw near Cockle Creek, leaning away from the forest and out towards the bay.

This plant is about 60cm high and eight years old.

Next Page Teatree bonsai, all about 20 yrs old (clockwise from top left)

Woolly - tree height 90cm

Mountain – 20 cm

Woolly – 80 cm

Smoky – 50 cm (8 yrs)

Shining – 70 cm

Mountain – 30 cm

