



Zen Buddhist temple garden, Kyoto.

Hearing the Japanese language of trees

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Japan. Land of the rising sun. Pioneer of the technological age we currently consume with gusto. Home to the geisha, martial arts, sumo wrestling, the tea ceremony, Zen Buddhism, Shinto ... and a reverence for trees which is probably unsurpassed worldwide.

A recent study tour to Kyoto, Nara and Nagano prefectures in central south-west Japan's island of Honshu offered opportunities for meetings with a host of individuals dedicated to the upkeep of a tradition that spans centuries of tree

management. *Niwashi* (master gardeners) are the highly respected guardians of a landscape aesthetic whose roots lie as far back as eighth-century Buddhist monks. This tradition was maintained and transmitted by Zen monks carrying out their daily duties of life within the temple. Its primary purpose is to obtain an impression of maturity within the individual tree and landscape/garden as a whole. *Niwaki* (garden tree) evokes the imprint left by time: exposed to the elements (wind, snow, fungi etc.) or animals (cattle, insects etc.), a body language develops. Through generations of study an understanding

develops which is then mimicked using horticultural techniques based upon that rare commodity in today's fast paced existence: patience!

The mesmerising forms of Japan's garden trees are by no means accidental. Like many skills and crafts from this island nation, an aesthetic has formed from an incredibly detailed understanding and interpretation of nature; this has grown through careful, considered observation.

Niwashi are the tree pruners of the urban domain, heading out each day in their three-quarter-sized trucks loaded with stepladders, mesh tarpaulins and an array of scissors, secateurs and hedge shears – all manually operated. As the newbie, I'm offered a child's-sized bamboo rake and an 18-inch long bamboo brush and enticed into action with the (obviously universal) phrase, 'The clean is most important!' The garden is an intricate web of native tree and shrub species planted very precisely amongst 200–300 tons of river stones which have been positioned with equal precision. Species including *Rhododendron*, *Quercus*, *Acer*, *Cupressus*, *Chamaecyparis*, *Juniperus*, *Podocarpus* and *Lagerstroemia* are trimmed and clipped meticulously on a biennial basis



(midsummer and autumn) to maintain good form and plant health. The only addition may be a late winter soil feed. Individual trees are often pruned by the same *niwashi* year after year, thus forming a familiarity of growth pattern, vitality and general condition – a continual and direct relationship between pruner and plant that we can only ponder on rather than learn from.

ArborJapan are based in Ikoma, Nara prefecture, and kindly organised a series of cultural and tree-related adventures during our stay. The owner, Jin-san Kobayashi, has travelled extensively in the UK and USA, studying at both Kew and the Oxford Botanical Garden for short periods. The knowledge acquired during his foreign studies has given him the unique perspective of blending western tree care practices with the traditional Japanese approach. ArborJapan is therefore ideally positioned to offer arborist services, garden tree pruning (*niwaki*), seed-collecting projects for botanical organisations and study tours within the emerging arborist industry in Japan. It is unusual to offer a mix of work in this fashion: traditionally, different professions do not cross-pollinate. As *toksubashi* (specialist climber), our *sensei* (teacher) Nobuo-san Fujimura had difficulty understanding why we would want to learn the skills and knowledge of the *niwashi*.

After 4–5 hours of sweeping and raking we were beckoned over to a 2m height Japanese black pine (*Pinus thunbergii*) by our *sensei*, Nobuo-san. He explained that the only work that we'd be offered, other than cleaning up, would be to carry out a process known as *moniage*. I soon realised that the complexity of knowledge was so different from that accumulated during 26 years of European tree work that staying with the basic tasks would probably be best. As the days passed I became more comfortable with starting and staying with step one! *Moniage* is a process carried out at the end of the growing season (October–December) on all pine species, where needles from the previous season's growth are removed throughout the tree. This is combined with the pruning of any new growth back to two or three growing buds on any branch tip; all the pruning work was carried out by our teacher. The old needles are plucked or pulled by hand, offering an intimacy with the varying growth habits of different parts of the tree – top to bottom, sunny side to shade areas. An awareness of the subtle differences begins to develop surprisingly quickly. Nobuo-san discussed how the hot summer of 2013 had stunted the growth in a particular specimen and left the foliage slightly chlorotic compared with previous



Karikomi garden, Nara.



Niwashi clipping camellias and carrying out *moniage* on a 300-year-old Japanese red pine (*Pinus densiflora*).



Traditional Japanese family crests, ArborJapan.



Right to left: Japanese white pine (*Pinus parviflora*), Camellia spp., Japanese black pine.



Nobuo-san Fujimura and Jin-san Kobayashi offer guidance to Japanese black pine pruning (*Pinus thunbergii*).

growing years. This level of observation seems to be banked for every individual plant that is worked on and carried over to successive growing seasons; it becomes part of the decision-making process that guides exactly the dose of pruning at each visit. In practical arboriculture, it seems that this detailed observation offers something that I've never realised or been party to in any interaction throughout my career as a practical arborist and specialist pruner, but one which is now becoming more regularly considered. Answers do not come immediately, but why should they? I'll stay with the questions and see what develops.

Shinto arose from the beliefs of the indigenous peoples who created myths to help explain the origins of Japan. There are strong elements of shamanic nature worship, particularly of rocks, trees, rivers and mountains. Old, exceptionally large or unique forms are thought to be the abodes of the gods and are considered sacred. The tying of rice-straw rope (*shimenawa*) around trees and rocks marking sacred boundaries is common practice within Shinto shrines in both urban and rural locations. We visited the rural Hitokotomishi Shrine in the southern part of Nara prefecture, which holds a spectacular 1100-year-old ginkgo tree. Under the guidance of a tree doctor, an order to carry out remedial works was obtained through the shrine authorities in 2012. The huge tree was in excess of 25m tall and leaning towards a 10m drop to the shrine car park below. As is the case with many shrine trees, the stem was shored with large wooden props and a large central section of the tree was removed to reduce risk of failure, leaving the massive 'pollard' head. The arborists at ArborJapan who carried out the works were very pleased with the response and



Shimenawa detail on ancient *Zelkova*.



Ancient *Zelkova* (*Zelkova serrata*) are common shrine trees.



Detail of ginkgo stem.



Ancient ginkgo at Shinto shrine.

vitality of growth since the pruning 18 months previously.

Our final visit took us north-east to Nagano prefecture and the city of Matsumoto, nestled beautifully on a plateau surrounded by mountains. The altitude, latitude and mountain scenery made for an early winter setting, with snow on the mountain caps and a distinct chill in the morning air. The daily blue skies and warm sunshine soon burned off the chills of late November! The main Shinto shrine is the setting for two 400–500-year-old *Zelkova serrata* (*keaki*). A more urban habitat you wouldn't find, positioned just a few hundred metres from the ancient castle at the city centre and wedged between four lanes of a public road on the central reservation. At almost 3m diameter, one can best admire this specimen from a small wooden bench across the road and contemplate its life, the history it has witnessed and the stories it might tell.

To visit a very specific aspect of the Japanese cultural and natural history, i.e. its trees, is an exciting adventure. On reflection, this whistle-stop trip filled almost every daylight hour with visual stimulus. An enormous mark has been indelibly etched on my psyche and since I returned to the UK rarely has a day passed when I haven't considered some aspect of what I experienced. From the venerable trees that are surely ancient in years to the

immaculately sculpted garden trees which are often equal in age and with all the character yet a fifth the size. The physical agility and stature of 50–60-year-old gardeners is astounding when compared with their western counterparts! One week has left me with years of questions, a lifetime's learning and a renewed urge to begin trying to understand the true nature of trees, with fresh eyes and a previously unconsidered suite of queries.

In so many ways, Japan is an assault on the senses! For me the experience has challenged an outlook developed through an educated career in practical tree work in the UK and Europe. An outlook that has been based upon, and controlled by, a general cultural and social consensus; by the studies, findings and conclusions of arboricultural researchers but with a pinch of personal experience and interpretation thrown in for good measure. Those who know me well might say, 'A midlife crisis!' And if that be the case I can only open my arms and welcome the experience, adventure and understanding the crisis brings.

Great thanks go to my hosts Jin Kobayashi and his family, Ken Sakoguchi and his family, Takashi Osaka, Kei Kinoshita, all of the students at the Shop-K splicing workshop and Paul, Sumire, Koko and Noa for their continued support and kindness.

