

Discovering Niwaki:

My journey discovering the Japanese style of pruning began with a visit to some friends in Sussex who run a nursery. We went for a walk to the pub via Nuthurst and Architectural Plants (now located near Pulborough). It was a Damascene moment and since then have loved Japanese gardens, plants and style. Our friends also told us about Jake Hobson. When I got back home I signed up for a couple of courses in pine pruning with Jake and having completed them was looking around for something to practice on.

Scots pine:

I had planted a Scots pine in the hedge at the top of the garden about ten years before and decided to see what I could do with it, partly because it was already creating quite a bit of shade in the garden. The photos below show it in December 2010 and having pruned it in April 2011.



1. The first step I took was to give the tree quite a hard pruning - shortening the main side branches back to a suitable side shoot large enough to continue to grow and re-shoot as pines don't shoot from bare wood this will encourage shorter, more dense re-growth (there are various books on pruning which are excellent at describing how, where and why including *Essential Pruning Techniques* by George Brown and Tony Kirkham and *An Illustrated guide to pruning* by Ed Gilman who also has lots of online information).

I started tying down some branches to get them below horizontal to try to replicate and speed up the growth associated with an ageing tree, these need to be re-adjusted regularly. As the branches were already well established and woody I used some of my old climbing rope which has an 11mm diameter, although large diameter it still needs to be checked regularly to prevent cutting into the stems. At this time I also removed the leader to promote growth of side branches at the top. Removal of some opposite branches at this time is advantageous to leave the asymmetry required of Japanese garden trees, leaving branches on the outside of a bending stem rather than on the inside. You can only work with what is there so compromise is often the way to progress.

2. May 2012:



1. When hard pruning was largely complete and I was reasonably happy with the framework the more detailed pruning cycle began. This is undertaken in spring, early summer and autumn. In spring new buds are thinned, by hand, to two outward facing buds which develop into candles - new shoots - in early summer. Scots pine buds are often in a cluster so deciding which to keep can be confusing, two large healthy looking opposite outward facing ones are best (all others should be removed) these will produce two long shoots (candles) later in spring which are then pinched back by a half or more before the needles open out, this encourages dense growth, this process is called midorisumi. In autumn the new growth is thinned leaving two shoots at the tip and old needles are removed leaving all the current years needles -called momiage. It looks like I did this all at once in the photos above, but as you can see in later photos trees are very forgiving.

3. June 2013:



More tying down and training is taking place. The important thing is to check the ties regularly - every couple of months because they will either need re-tensioning, loosening or repositioning so they don't cut into the trunk or branch, or, removing entirely once the branch has settled in the desired position. It is detailed, time consuming work on a large tree and requires patience as the results are a long time coming - but very rewarding when it does start to come together.

4. February and November 2019:



Thinning the buds in February 2019 (taken from garden side).



Momiage: Before

After

November 2019 - thinning the needles and making sure there are just two shoots.

5. April 2020:

Having thinned out the buds earlier in the spring I am now taking the opportunity to tie-down more branches. I need to do more at some point, when I get time.



Work tying down branches in April 2020

I have used a mixture of rope and 3-ply twine. I have tied the string to the end of the branch I want to be more horizontal and then pulled it down, tying it off on another branch, the trunk or into the hedge below. Bamboo can be used to help pull down a branch and keep it straight. I have used some large canes which a customer allows me to cut now and then from a large clump at the bottom of his garden.

6. May 2020:

The candles are extending at quite a rate and it is now that they need to be cut back by a half or more. This is done with finger and thumb or secateurs /scissors.



pinching back candles.



Scissors cutting out unwanted shoots.



May 2020 Pine



Midorisumi: Before.



After.

As you can see it has been a long journey both in learning and to get to a tree that is beginning to look more in the Japanese style from a rather brutal starting point - you may feel you have ruined a perfectly good tree, I know I had doubts in the beginning as to the wisdom of starting this!

Tools.

I have collected various tools over the years, sharp pruning tools are essential and much nicer to work with. One of the enjoyable things about going to Japan is bringing back some new pruning tools. I have some lovely hand made saws and secateurs which get a lot of use along with a pair of pine pruning scissors from Niwaki.com. They need to be kept sharp and clean , pine sap is very sticky and should be removed with water and soap after use.



a selection of tools

Final thoughts:

The niwaki process never really stops as the trees are constantly changing shape and needing pruning for maintenance. It is easy to make mistakes by cutting too much or not enough, or as I said above, by carrying out too much pine pruning in one go, or breaking your favourite branch tying it down, however, in my experience patience is rewarded, things grow back and it works out. I would recommend that anyone wanting to have a go at Japanese style tree pruning gets a copy of Jake Hobson's book 'Niwaki, Pruning, Training and Shaping Trees the Japanese Way'. He also has a lot of lovely tools for sale. I have learnt a huge amount from Jake, his book, together with my visits to Japan and the generosity of the Japanese people I have met out there, as well as having the opportunity to work and practice on my own plants .