

Tree Pruning: The Tour That Always Tours Tour

by Ichini and Hachi

For all those who don't know us we are Steve Wright (Ichini) and Joe Daly (Hachi), AKA The City and Guilders. Ichini being in Heavy Engineering and Hachi, a Bricklayer.

We have been JGS members for over 20 years and have participated in many of the JGS Japanese garden building projects such as: Norwich Cathedral; Walkden Gardens; Willowbrook Hospice in Rainhill, St. Helens; Bury Hospice in Lancashire; Pembroke College at Cambridge University; Kaetsu Centre in Cambridge; Valley Gardens in Harrogate; the rejuvenation of the *karesansui* Japanese Garden at Danescourt Cemetery in the Midlands; and building the Gold Medal winning garden at the RHS Show at Tatton Park. We also undertake volunteer work within Tatton's Japanese garden. All thanks to Graham Hardman and Robert Ketchell, without them none of these projects would have been possible.

Birmingham Botanical Gardens

We think it all started when what's his name, who carried around enough copper wire to go round the world, he'll know who he is, we think his name began with J or was it K, anyway he decided he'd have a rest from pruning the pine in the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. So Ichini and Hachi were asked whether they would travel from Manchester to take over the task, without hesitation they agreed and the pruning job became theirs.

The pine (Figure 1) is possibly a sub species of *Pinus parviflora*. Over several years they developed it further, but after a couple of years one major branch began to irritate the duo. It was rod straight and ran right up the centre of the tree so between them they decided "it had to go". Executive decision made, it was gone, chuckling to themselves, the duo had got their way (Figure 2). Their secret is now out, so please don't tell anyone.



Figure 1: *Pinus parviflora* at Birmingham Botanical Gardens before its annual prune.

Over time the width of the tree has grown and therefore within the last two years they have taken on another pair of hands to help out, this is JGS Midlands member Mr David Antley,

Around the same time the duo were becoming sought after from various corners of the World, well maybe just the North West of England, places like Market Drayton, Merseyside, and even Rainhill in St. Helens. This is where a chap called Robert Stevenson became famous for something called The Rocket. Could Ichini and Hachi one day become as famous as old Bobby Stevenson? –after all he built trains and they train trees !



Figure 2: The end result! The *Pinus parviflora* after pruning.

The Merseyside Pine. Part 1

The Merseyside Pine as the duo call it is a *Pinus nigra*. This project came about when a garden architect made enquiries as to whether there was anyone who could bring his client's cloud-pruned pine tree back to the condition it was in when it was bought. He looked up the JGS website and duly contacted Angela Davis, a JGS member who is an interpreter and fluent in Japanese or, as Ichini says, "she can speak the lingo". Angela put him in touch with Graham Hardman who then asked the duo if they'd

Tree Pruning... continued

be interested in pruning this pine. Ichini and Hachi contacted the architect to see what was required and to set a date to start the pruning. On arrival at the house they came upon two massive gates and a bank of security cameras. Ichini did a little dance for the cameras, as though he was appearing on Strictly Come Dancing, and then proceeded to fall flat on his back, legs in the air, looking like a dead fly. It has even been noted that when Ichini opens the fridge door and the light comes on he thinks it's a spotlight and starts to do the Ichini dance. Fred Grimshaw, the boss choreographer at the Bolshoi Ballet, has named this dance movement "the Ichini shuffle".

Once in the property they were taken aback to see this massive bush around six metres tall with a four or five metre spread (Figure 3a). The architect advised that the pine had been brought in from Europe as a cloud-pruned tree to be a centre piece in the garden. He further advised that it hadn't been pruned for at least seven years after it was purchased.

On a closer inspection of the tree the verdict was that they could do it, but it would be many years before it would look something like the tree purchased seven years before. This he accepted and the duo began the massive pruning job.

The work was started at the bottom and they would then work their way up the tree. The duo then agreed that the toss of a coin would decide who went up the tall aluminium steps to prune the canopy. Ichini lost and began to look somewhat bemused as to how he always kept losing the toss whilst, unknowingly, watching the smirking Hachi put his double headed penny safely back in his pocket, until the next encounter.

Surprisingly Ichini still hasn't cottoned on! Hachi is a little worried that Ichi-ni might have contracted

a new variant of Monkey Pox, as he is always scampering in the top of trees, has a new found penchant for bananas, and keeps rummaging through Hachi's hair!

Back to the pruning. Within the main branch structure only the last couple of feet at the end of the branches was alive, and some of that growth was no longer needed. Also, any vertical growth had to go, plus all the dead interior, of which there was lots.

Upon reaching the top of the tree the growth was dense and some of it two and three inches thick and several feet long, all this was taken out and only a thin skeleton remained (Figure 3b). By three thirty that afternoon there was more tree on the floor than there was on the tree.

Over the years and recovering from the shock the tree (not Ichini and Hachi) initially put on little growth but it is now quite vigorous, once again. The pine has also budded back down the branches, and the pads have spread out well. The odd major branch has also been removed to help with the overall look. It has taken ten years to get this pine to where it is now (Figure 3c) and we are told that the owner is over the moon with it.



Figure 3: The Merseyside Pine No 1: (a) in 2012 before pruning, (b) after its first prune - note the amount removed, (c) after its annual prune in 2022.



The Teed Pine

Sticking with pines, next comes the “Teed Pine” that is located in Rainhill, St. Helens.

About the same time as the trees mentioned earlier, we became very good friends with the two lady gardeners who look after the three Japanese gardens that the JGS built at Willowbrook Hospice, St. Helens. Rita and Sheila have been tasked with caring for the Japanese gardens within the hospice grounds and they do a magnificent job maintaining them. One day Rita [Teed] asked Ichini if he would look at a pine on the side of her drive. It was getting in the way and she didn’t want to lose it because her daughter gave it to her as a present thirty-four years earlier.

Arriving at Rita’s and seeing the pine, Ichini said that he and Hachi would love to prune it. It’s a fabulous tree, worth thousands ,and that it could be pruned so that it wouldn’t interfere with the drive. The job was ours.

The Teed pine is *Pinus parviflora*. It’s about eight foot tall and a little more in width. It was fairly dense with twin trunks one six inches and the other four inches in diameter. The duo started pruning by taking out the larger branches that weren’t needed and then thinning out the rest of the tree to define one branch from another, this also lets more light into the remaining lower branches.

Over ten years later the duo are still pruning the tree once a year, usually in October. It will then look good for most of the next year. It is also Ichini and Hachi’s favourite tree, as it always seems to respond favourably to whatever is done to it. Over the years it has had many passing admirers.

At the end of each pruning session the celebrations begin, all savouring Rita’s wonton soup and



Figure 4: The Teed pine: (a) and (b) are two views of the pine before its annual prune, (c) the finished tree.

other Chinese delights, duly followed by wine and chocolates. No wine for Ichini as he’s the driver, but he doesn’t refuse the chocolates. Rita’s Dad was Chinese and her Mam was a scouser. You can see the oriental side of her in the way she tends the Japanese gardens to perfection. The wine fuelled conversation goes on for hours (especially Ichini’s even though he hadn’t had any wine!). Some say his Covid injection was administered with an old gramophone needle and, lest we forget to mention Hachi’s waistline expanding, as the last chocolate disappears from the box.



Tree Pruning... continued



Figure 5: No. 1 Juniper in 2010 (a) view before from the front garden, (b) view from the drive, (c) and after the first pruning.

The Faul's Junipers, Market Drayton

While all these pines have been developing, Ichini and Hachi were also pruning a couple of *Juniper horizontalis* that are known as “The Market Drayton Junipers”. These have also been in training for ten years or more. The duo were approached by JGS members Graham and Christine Faul asking if anything could be done to enhance these trees.

Ultimately photos changed hands and once more the duo set off on The Tour That Always Tours Tour to tackle what was to become a long task. The juniper tree was very dense, full of dead wood, and with a few longish branches extending out from the mass (Figure 5a & 5b). After a couple of hours clearing out all the debris and unwanted branches a skeleton



Figure 6: No. 1 Juniper (a) during a recent prune, (b) after many autumn prunes, (c) after the annual prune in 2021.

began to evolve. The pile of rubbish was enormous, (seems to be a pattern here).

Chris and Graham said they didn't want it looking too Japaneesie. Really! They get two pruners who only do Japaneesie and come out with a statement like that! The duo looked at each other knowingly, "Mmmm, we'll show them what not looking Japaneesie looks like !" (see Figure 5c). In following years the proper trimming began (Figure 6).

Attention was also transferred to another Juniper (Figure 7) , and eventually both were looking as un-Japaneesie as ordered (not).

After yet more food, Chris and Graham pointed out a couple of pines that needed some attention and



Figure 7: No. 2 Juniper (a) before, (b) after the first prune, (c) after the annual prune in 2021.

a little red bridge that needed even more attention, the list was never ending, but in the end after many years two beautiful sculptures have been created, Japanese style (Figures 6c & 7c). Again, these trees are on full view to the public, and well admired. People in cars even slow down to take a look at them, sometimes even taking photographs!

The Juniper, Valley Gardens in Harrogate

Whilst helping with the regeneration of the Japanese garden in Valley Gardens the consensus was that a big old juniper shrub should be removed. After some negotiation the duo said that they could prune it much like the Faul's Junipers. Then, if it was not what was wanted, they would take it out.

On the morning of the prune in 2017 Dr Andy Bolton set up his cine camera to capture the duo in full flow, juniper pruning mode. This time-lapse footage "Cloud pruning of juniper - Valley Gardens Feb 2017" is on You Tube : https://youtu.be/_lrHuk_5wZM. As a result the juniper was saved and is now pruned annually (Figures 8 & 9).



Figure 8: This juniper in Valley Gardens had a major prune in 2017. This view shows it before the annual prune in 2021.

Tree Pruning... continued



Figure 8: The juniper shown in Figure 7 after pruning by Andy Bolton in 2021.

Andy also brought with him this metal contraption to help compact the soil, this he called his “Basher”. Since that day he has been known affectionately by the duo as “Basher Bolton”. The duo imagined a medical doctor coming towards them with this big lump of rusty metal and asking “Is there anything I can help you with?”, whilst pulling on a pair of surgical gloves. Hachi went rigid, turned blue and braced himself for what maybe the good doctor had in store for him.

Merseyside Pine No 2

The architect who contacted Ichini and Hachi regarding the first Merseyside Pine asked them if they would be interested in pruning another pine? He would willingly pay the same money that he had paid for the first tree-pruning to benefit Ichini

and Hachi’s charities, which are the Willowbrook and Bury hospices. The tree is a *Pinus sylvestris* and is a variety called ‘Norske’. It’s a slow growing form of Scots pine that lends itself nicely to be cloud-pruned. The tree in question is now placed between two buildings as a feature.

The tree is what we call a ‘pompom tree’ and, once again, the architect gave us free reign as to how it would be pruned. The pine is about seven feet tall and a similar spread (Figure 9a). The undersides of the pads were flattened to reduce the overall height, before tackling and shaping the tops (Figure 9b).

This tree had been trained in a nursery in Germany for many years, having previously been imported from Japan. These nurseries have so many cloud pruned trees that they therefore can’t

spend the time pruning each tree individually in the Japanese way as the duo would do. So the quickest most economical way for the nursery to prune is by way of shearing the pads, which tends to leave a lot of weak and dead crossing branches. Because of this, it became difficult to decide how to go about the correct pruning method. Therefore permission was asked, and granted, to do what they thought was best for the long term benefit of the tree.

The duo began to tackle the tree. There were a lot of the weak twigs hanging down, and a lot of dead in the centre of each pad, all of which was taken out. But once out, it was found these dead branches were holding other weak twigs above in position, therefore more little branches started to hang down. So it was decided that all hanging twigs had to go.

In the end it was the right action in that the pads were considerably thinner letting more light into the branches, and into the tree as a whole (Figure 10b).



Figure 9: Merseyside No. 2 pine (a) before pruning, (b) after the first prune.



Figure 10: Merseyside No. 2 pine (a) one year later and before a second prune, (b) after the second prune.

The architect informed the duo that next year the client wants to buy three more cloud pines, two similar to the one they've pruned and a considerably larger one. "Oh eki thump!". Here we go again, and a suspected overuse of the Hachi double headed penny.

Walkden Garden's Acer Palmatums

Unlike in bonsai, we don't often see *niwaki* Japanese maples as cloud-pruned trees, but Ichini and Hachi have, over the last fifteen years or more, trained two Japanese maples within Walkden Gardens in this style (Figure 11). One variety is known as 'Wabito' (lonely person or man) and the other is known only to its mother, as there was no label on it. Only these two trees have been pruned this way, as you can overdo this style if you do every tree in the garden.

This article is a log of where the 'Tour That Always Tours Tour' has travelled to over the last ten plus years. Needless to say the duo have gardens of their own, other gardens where they have trained trees, and also trees currently in training.

We hope that this article will inspire JGS readers to think about their trees and shrubs in a new way. How they can be developed with a little thought and bravery, "to have a go". Remember, if you cloud-prune a tree it is just as important to trim or prune the underneath as well as the top. With pines, keep the pads light and airy so that twigs inside don't die. If you're thinking of taking a major branch out, think well before doing it, there could be a better alternative! But the main thing is to enjoy the task.

Sayonara Ja Mata ne Ichini & Hachi



Figure 11: Two acer trees in the Japanese garden within Walkden Gardens (Sale, Greater Manchester) have been cloud-pruned by Ichi-ni and Hachi.