

Bonsai Tree

Trimming, Sculpting and Pruning





BONSAI TREES: GROWING, TRIMMING, SCULPTING AND PRUNING

PART 8

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WHAT TO LOOK FOR

In general there are five things that you should look for in nursery stock.

First, look at the roots and check to see if they give the appearance of a strong foundation. The roots, at the base of the trunk, should appear to gently spread out in a radial pattern (this will be less apparent on junipers) and should both provide a sense of stability and invite you to follow the line of the tree, focusing your attention on the trunk. Good roots invite you to examine the tree from the ground up!

If the roots look good, begin to examine the trunk. The qualities you are looking for in the trunk depend somewhat on the style of the tree.

In almost all cases, however, a thick base which tapers gradually and gently to a thin apex will make for a nice tree. If you are thinking about a formal upright design, you will want a very straight trunk, with little or no curvature. If you are considering other styles, you will want to examine how the trunk "moves."

Try to find a trunk that curves in interesting or unusual ways, that has some sense of movement, which invites you to examine it further. Follow the main trunk line to its highest point (that will, most likely, be the apex). Does it suggest a design to you? Does it look tree-like? Can you begin to see the tree within the plant?

Then look at the branching pattern. While most nursery stock will not be trained as bonsai, you should be looking for thick low branches and thinner higher ones. These branches will form the main structure of your tree. Try to imagine how they fit with and balance out the movement of the trunk.

At this point, a style should be suggesting itself to you. Does the tree fit any particular style? Can you see it as a windswept design, as a cascade? What kind of growth and

shaping will be required in order for the tree to emerge? Do you see something in that mass of branches, twigs, needles or leaves that others might not? How can you bring it out?

Finally, examine the plant to make sure it is healthy. Pull it out of its container and look to see if there are white fibrous roots (a sign of good health and growth) around the perimeter of the soil. Are the leaves colorful and vibrant? Is there new growth? Does the plant look healthy?

As you experiment more and more, signs of growth and health will become more apparent to you. If you suspect the tree is unhealthy, pass on it. For your first (or one of your first) time out, try to pick something that will be able to withstand the process of pruning, wiring and potting that you are going to undertake.

Plants chosen for bonsai should have attractive bark, and the trunk must give the illusion of maturity. The trunk should have girth, but must remain in proportion to the entire tree and should taper gradually toward the top of the tree. Sometimes, one or two of the main branches must be shortened to emphasize the vertical line of the trunk and give the trunk a balanced appearance.

To give the appearance of age, the upper one-third of the root structure of a mature bonsai is often exposed. Everywhere on the tree, but mostly from the front, the branches should look balanced and appear to be floating in space; they should not appear lopsided or top heavy. The branches should not be opposite one another with their lines cutting horizontally across the trunk. The branches give the bonsai dimension and establish the tree's basic form.

A bonsai should have a harmonious arrangement of branches without unsightly gaps. Flaws can be spotted by looking down on a bonsai. Upper branches should not overshadow lower branches.

Not all plants are equally effective as bonsai. To produce a realistic illusion of a mature tree, all parts of the ideal bonsai - trunk, branches, twigs, leaves, flowers, fruits, buds, roots - should be in perfect scale with the size of the tree.

Plants used for bonsai should have small leaves or leaves that become small under bonsai culture. Plants with overly large leaves will look out of proportion if chosen for bonsai.

Now that you've got your tree, what do you do next? Plant it, of course!