

## **A Bonsai Close-up on Pots and Potting** by Pauline Muth Copyright 1995, updated 2003

A pot can be considered as the setting for a jewel. The jewel is your bonsai. What part does the pot play in the total design?

- A pot should compliment your design giving it a special "frame" or design "mood"
- A pot can fade from view giving the tree center stage.
- A pot can dominate your tree and ruin the design.

The time to choose a pot is **after you have designed the bonsai tree**. Oh sure, we all have collected too many pots with the perfect tree designed over and over in our minds only to never locate the right specimen. We have all faced that shelf full of empty pots with a tree in hand only to find ourselves unable to locate the perfect match. The moral is, of course, simple: buy the pot only after you have styled the tree! (Do as I say, not as I do!)

### **Color Choices**

- Unglazed pots in brown, gray or terra cotta will work the best with most trees. Gymnosperms (conifers included) look the best in unglazed pots or in matte, subdued glazed finishes.
- Colored glazes work with deciduous trees. The color should be chosen to accent the best feature of the tree; leaves, fruits, flowers or bark. Pastel shades for flowers and darker glazes to point out fall foliage colors. Use a color wheel to set up complimentary or contrasting colors.
- White pots need a tree that shows white in the leaves or flower.
- Be sure that the pot color or design does not stand out more than the tree design!

## Pot Size

When determining the pot size we must be guided by artistic and horticultural sense. For young, undeveloped trees, allow for growth. The rules work best for the mature tree. Young trees following the rule will look good but it will need to be sized up over time. Also young trees and certain collected trees may need additional root space. These needs must over ride the esthetic needs to insure the survival of the tree.

The rules are based on the classical work of bonsai and a well-developed artistic eye. Always try your balled tree in several pots. Remember that you are creating a total picture of tree in a pot (*bonsai*).

John Naka uses these rules.

- Pot length:
  - In general, the length of the pot should be  $\frac{2}{3}$  the height of the tree.
  - If the height of the tree is shorter than the width, use the width measurement to determine pot length. Take  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the width for the length of the pot.
  - In multiple trunk style the length is  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the height of the tallest tree however you may wish to use a longer pot to create space.
  - In group plantings also use the  $\frac{2}{3}$  rule.
- Pot depth:
  - For most styles the pot depth matches the trunk size.
  - Cascade trees require a depth to visually match the foliage mass and will create balance.
  - Multiple trunk styles must consider the total visual picture being created. Both the length and depth will be affected depending on the scene being created.

- Collected trees need a depth that will accommodate the root ball and help the tree survive. As time passes and roots develop to form a fibrous mass, the longer roots that require the greater depth may be removed in some species and the tree can be repotted in a more suitably sized pot.
- The width of the pot should be less than the spread of the longest branches. This measurement is only useful if you are creating a pot or having one made, since pot width is determined by the potter.

### **Pot Style**

The shape of the pot must match the style and flavor of the tree:

- Straight trunks: rectangular pots
- Curved trunks: oval, round, round cornered, or rectangular pots
- Massive trunks with masculine designs: large stable looking pots.
- Cascade trees: deep or tall pots. Some may use a medium depth pot. If the tip hangs below the bottom edge of the pot, use a stand. The tree does not touch the table.
- In rock plantings: take the rock color and texture into consideration when choosing the pot so that they harmonize.
- Bunjin or literati: Small, round and shallow. Rough hand made.
- Antique glazed pots are used for all types of trees.
- A rock used as a pot must have these characteristics:
  - It must be hard with a rough surface.
  - The color must not take away from the plants.
  - The shape and size must blend, not over power the tree.

## Preparing the Tree

Clean and comb out the roots. Be sure that you learn enough about the tree species so that you are planting it in the correct season. Cut roots that are vertical or horizontally too big for the pot. Eliminate large old roots masses directly under the trunk to encourage new root formation. Leave enough fibrous roots to support the tree. Treat the roots with rooting hormone. **MAKE SURE** that the roots never dry out during this process. Many species can have all the soil removed, others cannot. **You must learn the differences.**

## Preparing the Pot and Planting the Tree

1. Be sure the pot is clean.
2. Fasten screening or dry wall tape over the drainage holes.
3. Set up anchorage wires (two or more) through the wire holes, or lacking these, through the drainage holes. Be sure not to pull holes in the screen.
4. Put on gloves and a face mask to protect yourself at this point.
5. Put a layer of bonsai soil in the bottom of the pot. (Be sure to use a soil mix that will best support the species of trees.) If the pot is large, use a coarser mix in the bottom to help drainage. Remember that the wider the pot, the slower the drainage. Tall pots have faster drainage than short pots.
6. Add mycorrhizoid spores at this stage if the tree requires them.
7. Put the proper dose of micronutrients and iron in the bottom soil. Add in Biogold fertilizer IF it is the start of the growing season.

8. Dust the root mass with a rooting powder such as Hormodin 3 to promote root growth.
9. Position the tree in the pot on the top of a mound of bonsai soil. Be sure to consider the total balance of the composition.
  - In rectangular and oval pots the tree is planted slightly back of the center and to the side of the shorter bottom branch.
  - In round and square pots, the tree is usually placed in the center of the pot.
  - Occasionally you are restricted by the root mass. Over time, work on the mass to develop less restricting roots. Taking time saves many trees!
10. Add bonsai soil in slowly using your chopstick to remove air pockets that would dry out the roots.
11. Before totally filling the pot, tighten the two sets of anchor wires to stabilize the tree.
12. Continue to add soil until the job is complete.
13. Water the tree. As this point it is best to soak the pot in a B-9 solution and water from the top. After a 10 minute soaking put the tree in a shady area for a week. Do not fertilize for a couple of weeks.
14. ENJOY!