

CHOOSING A POT FOR YOUR BONSAI

History of Potted Plants

Container-grown plants, including trees, have a history stretching back to the early times of Egyptian culture. However, the lineage of bonsai derives directly from Chinese penjing, which means "tray scenery". The Japanese equivalent of penjing is "bonsai." When you understand the translation you can see the container is, in fact, an integral part of the whole. However, merely planting a tree in a pot does not necessarily create a bonsai. A bonsai is a healthy miniature artistic representation of a mature tree (or trees) that exists in an appropriate pot or container. The tree and pot together must form a unified whole!

Containers [or pots] are to trees as clothes are to people. A pot can totally alter the appearance of a tree, just as clothing can change a person. Like clothing, pots are also subject to changes in fashion. Ancient Chinese scrolls and drawings indicate the earliest penjing were trees on shallow soapstone or marble trays complete with natural undergrowth creating a total miniature environment. The trays gradually evolved into a wider range of creatively shaped pots which are more wild looking and brighter colored. On the other hand, bonsai have evolved into more simplified shapes with larger-in-proportion trunks and containers whose lines are basic with muted, earth tone colors.

The earliest known scroll to depict dwarfed potted trees in Japan is dated around 1195AD. It depicts wooden tray and dish-like pots with dwarf landscapes on modern looking wooden shelves. Scholars have decided these were probably imported from China.

A scroll dated 1351 depicted dwarf trees and potted landscapes displayed on short poles. Potted landscape arrangements made during the next hundred years or so included figurines after the Chinese fashion to add scale and depth. These miniatures would eventually be considered garnishes decidedly to be excluded by the Japanese who were simplifying their creations.

Around the 14th century, the Japanese term for potted trees was "the bowl's tree" (hachi-no-ki) which denoted the use of a fairly deep pot.

From about 1465 to 1800, Japan imported most of their containers from China. A few potters in Yixing, China began producing plain - unglazed and purplish brown — containers specifically to be exported to Japan.

In early 1800, in Itami, Hyogo, Japan, a group of scholars of Chinese arts met to discuss styles in the art of miniature trees. They decided to call this miniature tree art "bonsai". This term had the connotation of a shallower container which typified where the art had

evolved. The term "bonsai", however, would not become regularly used for nearly a century.

Around 1900, it suddenly became fashionable to again use deep round pots for Bonsai. Those from China were most often made from porcelain and highly decorated with painted scenes, while the Japanese, who were now making quite a few of their own pots, had less decoration, if any, which was usually carved into the clay prior to firing. In the latter part of the 20th century, the fashion again shifted and shallow, plain pots have become the vogue through-out not only the Orient but throughout the world.

Here in the United States, from around 1965 to 2005, it was the "in" thing to use a Tokoname pot for your tree. Tokoname is not a pot manufacturer but a village in Japan where individual potters using local clays create their wares and sell them under the Tokoname name. They are available in both glazed and unglazed finishes. Up until 1990 Tokoname pots were imported on a very limited scale and were therefore expensive and exclusive. As Bonsai has become more popular the demand for quality pots has increased and the Tokoname potters responded by increasing production to such a level that the exclusiveness has vanished. The quality is still there.

The current fashion in Europe is to have a one of a kind custom pot made by a European potter for your tree. The information cards posted at European exhibits describe not only the tree, but also the name of either the potter or pot manufacturer and the country of origin. This recognition of potters is almost non-existent here in the U.S.

Antique Bonsai pots are scarce in the United States but every so often you see one. They tend to subconsciously lend certain credibility to the tree and definitely should be identified.

This discussion on Bonsai pots will be based upon the present fashion scene and reflects what has been exhibited and published here in the early part of the 21st century.

BASICS

Containers for Bonsai fall into two categories, the training container and the display pot. Training containers are used in the early stages of tree development and can be of any material as long as they have drainage hole(s). Training containers are usually over sized to allow for root development. The relationship to the tree is irrelevant. Enough said about training containers.

There are numerous materials, which can and have been used as containers for Bonsai. The most common type of pot is made of stoneware clay. Other materials quite often used are fiberglass, wood, plastic, mica, concrete, copper, and porcelain, volcanic rock, marble and stone [as in slab].

There are basics which relate to all pots:

- All Bonsai pots must have drainage hole to allow excess water to pass through. The larger and more numerous the holes the better.
- A good pot will not have areas within it which will trap water and subsequently cause root rot. =
- Bonsai pots should not be glazed on the inside. If they are glazed, this will cover the texture of the clay and the roots will not be able to anchor to anything.
- All the feet should touch the supporting surface.

Traditional Bonsai pots are made of ceramic material, usually stoneware clay. Stoneware is used because it is frost-proof. That is, they do not absorb moisture and therefore can go thru the freeze/thaw cycle without damage. Pots made from white, as in dinnerware, or red earthenware clay are not recommended, as they tend to absorb moisture through the unglazed areas and will crack when exposed to temperatures below 32 degrees F.

From 1985 to around 2000 there was a dramatic increase in the availability of pots of many sizes and shapes imported from Korea manufactured of MICA. MICA pots are 80% mica, 15% polyethylene and 5% graphite. The mica does not transmit temperature extremes, which stabilizes the soil temperature and the polyethylene bonds the materials together in a non-porous format which prevents breakage and the graphite gives color. The drawbacks with MICA are twofold: it scratches and when an empty pot is exposed to extreme sunlight over a period of time, it will warp.

Since 2005, the price of Mica has skyrocketed and has forced most Mica pot makers out of business. Mica is the primary ingredient in computer boards, micro chips, etc. If you are planning on entering Bonsai potted in a Mica pot in an exhibition with hopes of winning a prize, a word of advice. Most Bonsai purists [and these are usually the people judging exhibits] will not consider a tree in a MICA pot worthy of a prize. Speaking of exhibiting, never exhibit your tree in a brand new pot. Let the pot weather first. Believe it or not, you can tell (and so can the judge).

Now as we began the discussion on choosing your pot, one final item -never choose a pot and then style the tree to fit. Always style your tree first and then look for the appropriate pot.

PROPORTIONS BETWEEN TREE AND POT

- In a typical Bonsai, the length of the pot should be 2/3 the height of the tree. You usually have no control over the width of the pot, as the proportions are already determined by the potter.
- If the tree height is less than its width, the length of the pot should be 2/3 of the width of the spread of the tree. Never have the length of the pot equal the height or width of the tree.

- On a single upright, planting depth of the pot should match the trunk width.
- On trees collected from the wild and trees with deep tap roots, you can follow the trunk rule by setting the tree on an earth mound in the pot.
- The pot for a cascade or semi-cascade should be either wide-medium depth or tall and narrow. Never plant a cascade in a shallow pot. The length of the tree apex to lowest point] should never match the pot height.
- For a double trunk, twin tree. sprout. raft or group planting chose a long shallow pot. The length of the pot should be 2/3 or less than the height of the tallest tree. In recent years it has become accepted fashion to have a longer pot to emphasize a meadow or field. These proportions also relate to slab plantings.
- A rugged and powerful looking tree should be planted in a pot which contributes to the feeling A straight sided pot with simple feet will meet the need, there should be no designs on pot no bands or lips.
- A round pot is suitable for a very stylized composition. The primary design element of the tree should be interesting designs on the trunk. The branches as well as the pot are subordinate to the trunk composition. Round pots can have unique qualities, i.e. fancy feet, rivet designs, and textured clays. A very stylized pot for a very stylized tree.

CONIFERS AND EVERGREENS

Conifers and evergreens create a very quiet mood, a subtle mood. Therefore the containers that we use are primarily gray and brown unglazed so they reflect the very quiet mood. As an example, a pine with a soft gray bark would do well in a gray pot. On the other hand if you have a Shimpaku Juniper which when lightly brushed has a rich brown bark, you would want a brown pot, preferable one with a little red in it to complement the bark color.

DECIDUOUS, FLOWERING AND TROPICALS

Most deciduous, flowering and tropical trees may be planted in either glazed or unglazed pots. Select the color relative to the color of the leaves, fruits, flowers, bark, etc. The color can either harmonize or contrast.

For example, say you have a Chinese Elm with fantastic branch ramification that you really like to show it in the winter when it has shed its' leaves. A gray pot would work great and will harmonize with the gray bark of the Elm. In the summer the gray pot will provide a subtle contrast with the small green leaves. You can pick a finish to harmonize with the foliage. Both will work, just keep it subtle so as to not overpower the tree.

Instead of the Elm, let's say you have a Maple. A Maple has bright red leaves in the spring and fall with light green leaves in the summer. In this situation a pastel green or blue pot would be nice to provide contrast in the spring and fall and harmonize with the green leaves in the summer. Once again, keep it subtle.

In the case of flowering or fruiting trees, you can and need to provide contrast. If you have a Crabapple or Pyracantha that has white flowers in the spring and red fruit in the fall. A bold blue will show off both the flowers and fruits.

If you have a tree with a yellow flower or fruit, you might want to consider more harmony with the pot color. A light yellow, crème, or tan would be appropriate. A bold color might overwhelm the yellow flower and fruit.

FRONT OF POT

We noted earlier that guidelines on proportions are relevant when viewing the tree from its designated front. There are a few basic guidelines as to what constitutes the front of a pot:

- Rectangular pot-the long side is considered the front.
- Shallow hexagon pot-one of the flat sides would be the front.
- Deep hexagon pot-a corner is the front.
- Oval pot-the long side of the oval is the front.
- Round pot-the feet should be symmetrical [center on each side] when viewed as the front.
- Deep, square pot-either the flat side or a corner may be the front.

This article was written by Tom Mounce of the Bonsai Society of Greater Cincinnati. It is used to aid beginner bonsai enthusiasts in the goal of achieving better bonsai.