

Basic Guidelines for Bonsai Pot Selection

By Roger Snipes

Many people find it difficult to select appropriate containers for their bonsai. It really isn't all that hard to do if one is acquainted with a few basic principles of proper pot selection. Of course there are a myriad of details that one can consider when looking for just the right container, but a solid knowledge of the basic guidelines will allow one to select a container that will at least be appropriate for the tree, and that will enhance the appearance of the composition.

When choosing a pot, one must keep in mind that the tree and pot need to work together to make an attractive presentation. Just as an inappropriate frame will detract from a beautiful painting, an inappropriate pot will detract from an otherwise beautiful bonsai. The pot should always be subordinate to the tree. If you look at a bonsai and the first thing that catches your eye is the pot, then it is probably not the correct choice for that particular tree. It may be too colorful, too fancy, too big, or the wrong shape, etc. With all this in mind, I have listed some of the basic guidelines for pot selection here.

Size

- The first thing to look at when selecting a pot for a given tree is ***the width of the pot***. The pot's width should be roughly equal to 2/3 to 3/4 the height of the tree. Alternatively, in the case of a bonsai that is wider than it is tall, the pot width should be roughly equal to the width of the tree's canopy. The measurement from front to back is generally not considered as it will have been established by the potter, but it is usually around 2/3 of the width of the pot.
- The second thing to look at is the ***depth of the pot***. The pot's depth should generally be about 1 to 1.5 times the caliper of the tree's trunk measured just above soil level. This rule only holds true for trees that have attained a reasonable trunk diameter; it isn't applicable to "twigs" or seedlings. Trees that need to gain trunk caliper should be in larger training pots, or in the ground. When applying this guideline for determining pot depth, your choice must be tempered by the horticultural needs of the individual tree. Sometimes certain trees require a deeper pot than one would choose if only looking at artistic considerations. For instance, many flowering and fruiting bonsai are kept in pots that are deeper than one would otherwise choose. This is because those trees tend to require more moisture than can be provided in a very shallow pot. Also, some trees just don't do well when their root systems are in extremely shallow pots; so the horticultural needs of the individual tree must always take precedence when choosing a pot.

Shape

- Although there are many things to consider when choosing an appropriately shaped pot, just as when selecting the size there are some basic guidelines that will point you in the right direction. Much of what governs the choice of pot shape is the style and general feel of the tree:
 - Formal upright:** trees with powerful trunks should generally have a rectangular pot with straight sides and a prominent outside lip.
 - Informal upright:** trees with gentle curves can use a rectangular pot with angled sides, rounded corners, and an inside lip. Informal upright trees with lots of movement can use an oval pot with curved sides.
 - Semi-cascade:** these trees generally use a round or square pot that is deeper than the general "depth of pot equals width of trunk guideline" would normally suggest. The sides and the configuration of the lip can vary depending on the general feel and shape of the tree.

Cascade: cascading trees normally have a round or square pot that is taller than it is wide.

Forest: forest or group plantings usually have a relatively shallow oval pot whose depth would be appropriate for the trunk diameter of the main tree in the composition. The pot should be wide enough to allow some empty space on the sides of the composition.

Literati: trees in the literati or bunjin style normally use a fairly shallow round pot that is somewhat rough or primitive looking. The pot should suggest the harsh environment in which a tree of that style would live in its natural setting.

- Ultimately, the shape and feel of the pot should complement the general feel and style of the tree; a powerful, imposing tree should have a powerful, straight-sided, heavy feeling rectangular pot with a prominent out-turned lip, while a more delicate tree should have a lighter feeling rectangular pot with more rounded sides or corners, or an oval pot, and the pot should have a less prominent lip, or an in-turned lip.

Color

- Choosing the correct color for a pot can be tricky, but it really isn't all that difficult if one keeps some basic guidelines in mind. As when choosing the shape and style of a pot, the chosen color should be one that goes well with some aspect of the tree, i.e. foliage color, bark color, flower, or fruit color, without clashing with any other aspect of the tree.

Unglazed brown or grey pots are normally chosen for evergreens such as pines, junipers, spruce, etc. The brown color goes well with the green foliage, and gives a feeling of the earth. Besides being appropriate for evergreens, an unglazed brown pot is generally appropriate for virtually any tree, and is always a good choice if in doubt as to what color to choose.

Glazed pots are usually used with deciduous and flowering or fruiting trees. The color of the pot should be chosen to either harmonize, or to contrast with the color of the tree at some phase of the yearly cycle. For example, a tree that has a red or orange leaf color in the fall will look good with a green or blue green colored pot. A tree that has yellow flowers in the spring could have a blue or violet colored pot. The pot color should be chosen with the tree's most prominent feature or growth phase in mind (assuming that is when the tree is normally displayed), i.e. flower or fruit color, fall foliage color, spring foliage color, bark color in winter, etc. Some thought should be given to the look during other times of the year as well. Try to choose a pot color that will not be out of place during the part of the year when the tree isn't producing its most colorful show.

There is much more to learn on the subject of pot selection; I have only scratched the surface here, but being familiar with these basic guidelines will provide a good starting point. For further study, I suggest the following books:

[Basic Bonsai Design](#), by David DeGroot

[Bonsai Techniques I, and Bonsai Techniques II](#), by John Naka

[Bonsai Kusamono Suiseki](#), by Willi Benz