

The Art of Bonsai

By Eugene Howell

Some of us don't have the 15 to 20 years remaining to wait for a small tree to gain sufficient size to become an impressive bonsai. Then others of us simple don't have the patience to wait that long. There is, fortunately, a way around this frustrating aspect of the bonsai hobby. The way to do it is to create a forest planting. Typically such a planting will use much younger and less highly developed trees than any other type of bonsai.

Aside from questions about all the usual rules that go with the layout of a forest planting, the novice to forest plantings usually has two questions: "How do you keep the trees in place on a natural slab?" and "How do you keep all the bonsai soil from washing from the slab the first time you water?"

Let's address each of these questions; one at a time.

A good forest planting requires planning. One way of doing this is to follow the example of a draftsman; make a diagram of the finished planting showing where each of the trees will be placed and their spatial relationship to all other trees on the slab.

With an outline of the slab drawn on a sheet of paper, each of the trees should be drawn on it (use little circles). The placement should identify where the first, second, third and fourth trees will go. The number one tree has the thickest and tallest trunk; the number two has the second thickest and tallest, etc. The numbers (sizes) of the others, beyond number four, usually do not need to be identified, just their spatial relationship to the other trees, so place circles where the other, smaller, trees will go, but do not number them. Only an outstanding bonsai artist will get the placement correct the first time. All of us "wannabes" will usually wear out a pencil eraser moving them around the drawing until we think they look good.

In placing the circles on the diagram you should keep a couple of rules in mind. First, never have a tree directly behind one in front of it so the viewer cannot see it from the front; but only a tiny bit of offset is OK. The idea is to be able to tell that there are two trees, even if one's trunk is only partially visible. Second, never have three trees in a straight line (always have them form a triangle). Third, never have the trees spaced uniformly (have some of them very close to others, some more distant). Always vary the distances between trees. Fourth, use an odd number of trees until you reach a number of 13 and above that number it doesn't matter whether you use an odd or even number. Always have a number one, number two and number three tree (if you are using at least that many trees).

Having reached the point where the placement of all the trees looks good, we can now discuss how to keep the trees in place on the slab.

The simplest method is to use plumber's putty-epoxy. This is recommended because the sticky stuff needs to be very strong when dry, bond to a relatively smooth surface (the slab), and stay bonded under constant moisture conditions.

After making your trip to the local hardware store for the epoxy (at Home Depot it is in the Plumbing aisle), it's time to dive in. Take the drawing you made and mark a spot on the slab where each of the trees will go. You probably should place the trees on each of the spots and verify that your concept of where they should go looks good in real life. Don't worry if they fall over, the idea is to hold two or three upright at one time and get the general idea of how they are going to "mesh". If you are completely satisfied with your arrangement, cut pieces of 2.5mm or 3.0 mm bonsai wire for each tree and glue one at each spot marked on the slab. Place the epoxy at the center of each piece of wire. Usually a ball of epoxy the size of a marble will do the trick. After you press the epoxy over the wire, make sure it stays motionless until it hardens. This usually takes only about 30 minutes. Although the directions with the epoxy say it will work underwater, I have found that you get a better bond to the slab if the slab is dry and clean.

With the wires securely attached to the slab, you are all set to place each tree in the designated position (remember which trees are numbered one through four) and twist the wire around each so that it is held upright firmly in the position you wish it to be. All that remains is to add bonsai soil.

Now let's look at how it is that we keep this newly applied soil from washing from the slab.

If you have been around bonsai for any period of time you have heard of the term “muck”. This is the miraculous stuff that holds the soil on the slab. Essentially what you do is make a small dam that goes all the way around the slab at (or near) its edge. This dam will not wash away and is what keeps the soil from doing just that.

The obvious question at this point is: “What is muck?” Like several other things in bonsai, there are different recipes for muck and each experienced bonsai enthusiast has his own favorite one. Whatever the recipe, it needs to stay in place (not wash off), not dry out and crack, not lose its stickiness (so it keeps holding to the slab) and be fertile enough to allow moss and tree roots to grow into it. This latter requirement is particularly important if you make a forest or penjing planting where trees are planted on rocks.

Some recipes are better than others because of their ability to meet most (or all) of the requirements stated above. The one that I find that comes closest to meeting all these is one that uses a little Bentonite. This is an extremely fine clay that is so sticky you wouldn't believe it. It is used in the well-drilling business to line the drill holes in the ground. But pure Bentonite has too many major disadvantages: it is far too sticky, when allowed to dry out it automatically cracks badly, after drying it actually rejects water, and it is so dense that roots and moss will usually not penetrate it. The key to its use is to mix it with another material that will correct all (or most of) these deficiencies. The recipe I find most useful is a mixture of one part Bentonite with 5 parts “Black Kow” (this is a decomposed cow manure sold at Home Depot, Lowes, Wal Mart, etc) along with one part sphagnum moss cut into one inch lengths (be sure to add the moss before any water is added to the mixture). The resulting mixture, is still sufficiently sticky, is easy to handle, stays in place, is very easy to rewet (if it dries out) and can be reshaped on the slab as long as it is moist.

When you mix a batch, do so in a sealable one or two gallon bucket (a little goes a long way) and you will always have some handy when the need arises.

I hope this gives you some helpful information and that you have fun and success with your next slab planting.