

# The Art of Bonsai

By Eugene Howell

Sometimes we have a beautiful tree that we are ready to put into a bonsai pot and simply cannot decide what type and size into which to put it. This is particularly true with newcomers to the art of bonsai. While several of the factors that must be addressed in making the decision are intuitive, there are several very important ones that have come down through the years from the long experience and expertise of the Japanese. If you master these few “rules”, you may not wind up with the tree in the “ideal” pot, but you won’t be far off. The “intuitive” part of selecting a pot will naturally develop as you see how trees look with various pots.

Let’s go over these “rules” from the Japanese and see if they cause any particular problems.

There is an application to bonsai of the old saying “Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?” In the case of bonsai the question is, “Which comes first, the shaping of the tree or putting it in the pot?” If you know the rule concerning the relationship of the size of the pot to the size of the tree, then you know that you should always style (shape) the tree first and when this is complete, then select the proper sized pot.

The rule to which we are referring says that the length of the pot should be a tiny bit more than  $\frac{2}{3}$  the height of the tree. As an example, if the tree is 3 feet tall, then the pot should be slightly over 2 feet long (about 25 or 26 inches). This rule is modified for a tree that is wider than it is tall. In this case the pot should be a tiny bit more than  $\frac{2}{3}$  the width of the tree. As an example, if the tree is only 18 inches tall, but is 36 inches wide, then the pot length should also be about 25 or 26 inches.

OK, we know how to determine the length of the pot, but what do we do about the height of it? In this case (there are a couple of exceptions) the height of the pot should be the same as the diameter of the trunk when measured just above the nebari (root flair). Thus a tree with a 3 inch diameter trunk would be placed in a pot that is 3 inches high. One exception to this rule is when planting a cascade. In this case the cascade tree should be placed in a tall pot so that the tip of the foliage does not touch the stand or table. There is one rule to remember when using a cascade pot. The distance from the apex of the tree to the lowest tip of the foliage should never be the same as the height of the pot. Also the cascade portion of the tree can be either above the bottom of the pot or below it, but should never be the same as the bottom of the pot.

Here is another exception to the height-of-the-pot rule. When making a group or forest planting, the pot should be fairly shallow and long. The length-of-the-pot rule also pretty well goes out the window on this type of planting. Although you normally would use  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the height of the tallest tree to determine the length, if you are intentionally trying to give the impression of a meadow, then the pot may be longer than the tallest tree.

The shape of the pot is the next thing to consider. Believe it or not, there are general guidelines on which pot shape goes with which style tree. Usually a formal upright, or fairly straight tree, will go best in a rectangular pot. A tree that curves, such as an informal upright, will usually go best in an oval or round pot. It will also go well in a pot with rounded corners. Lastly, it is acceptable (but not the best choice) to place an informal upright into a rectangular pot.

The character of the tree also sways the decision on the style of pot. A very rugged tree should be placed in a rugged-looking pot. Here is where the “intuitive” part of selecting a pot begins to come into play. You can’t describe what a rugged pot looks like, you just know it when you see it. Some people talk about a masculine or feminine looking pot. Here again, you know it when you see it. In general a rugged (or masculine) pot will typically be unglazed, earth-toned, and have very sharp edges and corners. A feminine one will be glazed, pastel colored, and will have softer edges and corners.

There are several more secondary guidelines on the selection of the pot, but if you master the ones already discussed you will have a pot that will do just fine. Keep these in mind when we make our next trip to the pot man.