

# The Art of Bonsai

By Eugene Howell

You are a newcomer to bonsai, you have attended all the meetings for the past 6 months, you have looked through a beginner's book, and you have listened and concentrated very hard during the various demonstrations and despite all this, when you look at a pre-bonsai tree you don't have the slightest idea where to begin in styling it into a new bonsai. Added to this is the fear that whatever you do decide to do will inevitably be the wrong thing.

Let's attack each of these roadblocks and try to get through them so you can get into the real joy of bonsai: seeing a raw tree turned into something with real beauty as a result of what you have done.

The first thing you need to get over is the fear. There is little you can do to a tree that cannot be corrected with time and planning. There are obviously exceptions to this statement, but for the present just accept it. The biggest fear is that you will kill the tree by doing what you plan to do. You may, in fact, kill it, but so what. Get yourself another pre-bonsai and try again. There is a saying in bonsai that goes something like this: "If you haven't killed a hundred trees, then you haven't grown as a bonsai artist". By not doing things that you think "may" kill the tree, you never learn the limits of what can be done without killing it, and you therefore seldom achieve the maximum potential of the tree. Your future as a bonsai enthusiast does not crumble into dust just because you kill a tree. I would hate to tell you how many I have killed over the years. I managed to make three of them go belly-up last year alone. But in each case I learned something that will be of value in the future.

Once you have truly come to peace with the idea that the world does not come to a screeching halt when your tree dies, then, and only then, are you ready to dive into the art form and make it work for you.

OK, your jittery nerves are settled and you are ready to tackle the styling job. So what comes first?

The very first thing to do when styling a raw tree for the first time is to examine the base of the tree to see if there is nice nebari (flair where the roots join the trunk). You do this to help you determine where the front of the tree should be. To do this you probably will have to scrape away the soil around the bottom of the trunk to expose the top of the roots. Nurserymen are famous for planting their stock too deep in the pot, so don't hesitate to dig away. Frequently I am surprised at how nice the flair is when about an inch or two of soil is pulled back. If you are lucky, you will find that there is an even distribution of large roots all the way around the base of the trunk. If such is the case then the roots will not dictate where the front of the tree will be. If the distribution is not equal all the way around, then the roots will probably determine the front (you must know where the front of the tree will be before you can do any further styling).

How does the root distribution determine the front? It does this by how the base of the trunk looks when viewed from each side of the tree. If one view shows a large surface root on the right side and no root at all on the left, then that view looks awkward and unbalanced. The tree looks as though it could fall over toward the side with no root.

If one of the views shows a strong root on both the left and right sides and another one coming toward you from the surface you are examining, then this view shows a nice balance and is an excellent candidate for the "front" of the tree. In many cases you will find that there are no strong roots radiating outward from the exterior base of the trunk, so in that case you move on to other ways of selecting the front.

If the roots allowed you to select the "candidate front" you now move on to examine the trunk. This examination will either solidify the "candidate front" as the final selection, or will cause you to modify the location of the front based on what the trunk is doing. In the case where there are no strong roots at the exterior base of the trunk, the trunk itself will provide the first indication of where the front should be.

In the event that this discussion has caused your eyes to glaze over, let's wait a while to continue this subject (so you can think about what has been said above). In the meantime, if you are helplessly confused on what has been discussed thus far, please give me a call and I will do my best to clear away the fog.

(To be continued next month, so keep an eye on your email)