

The Art of Bonsai

By Eugene Howell

In the last notes I sent you, we began the discussion of how to find the front of the pre-bonsai tree that is about to receive its first styling. We learned that the root flair gives the first indication of where the front may be. We also learned that if the roots don't fulfill this mission then we next look at the trunk to determine the front. In this article we will find out how it is that the trunk does this job.

The characteristic that most people observe first about a trunk is its movement. By this is meant the curves and twists that the trunk has as it goes upward from its base to its apex. Observe the trunk from all sides and decide which view provides the most interesting and pleasing set of curves and twists. This will likely turn out to be the front, but there are a few more considerations that need to be made before the final decision is made. I won't go into these in this article but you do need to be aware of these other considerations. They are whether there are large unsightly scars on the proposed front, whether there is reverse taper in the selected front, and whether the top 1/3 of the tree leans toward or away from the viewer with this as the front (it should lean toward the viewer). If any of these are serious, then the front may need to be changed.

Having decided which view is the most pleasing and interesting, now look for taper in the trunk. The term "taper" means that the trunk gradually and continuously gets thinner and thinner as you go up the trunk. If it does, then great, you have likely found the front. If it doesn't, then you are now faced with making your first decision on what and where to prune.

It is important for the trunk to have taper, so now you pick out a path up the tree that will give just that. This involves forgetting about where the present trunk-line of the tree is and instead, picking out a major branch that will become part of the trunk-line and provide the new apex. The idea here is that the branch has a smaller girth than does the trunk, so if the entire top of the tree is pruned away just above this branch, then the trunk-line now goes out this branch and since it is thinner than the trunk, the trunk now shows taper at the spot where the branch becomes part of the trunk-line.

If this branch does not also have sufficient taper, then the same pruning job is done part way toward its tip so that the new trunk-line now moves onto an even smaller branch. Thus with your first one or two pruning cuts, you have given taper to the tree.

There are several other considerations that need to be made when selecting the branch which is to become the new trunk-line. The primary one is to observe the direction in which the branch points. It should be in harmony with the remainder of the trunk. If you want to add movement to the trunk as you add taper, then selecting a branch that moves in a slightly different direction does this.

Now that you know the front of the tree, stick a piece of wire upright into the soil to mark the front. As you begin to pick out branches to prune away, you will be amazed at how easy it is to forget where the front is and prune away a branch that you really needed.

While directly facing the front of the tree, start at the base of the trunk and go upward. Decide where the number 1 branch is (it should be between 1/3 and 1/2 the way up the trunk). It should point either to the right or left but not the front or back. Ideally the first two branches will point toward your right and left shoulders (in either order). Tie a small piece of string around this branch so you don't forget which one it is. Here again, it is not too difficult to prune it away and then realize what you have just done. Next, on the opposite side of the tree, pick out the number 2 branch. It should be a short distance further up the tree than is the number 1 branch. Mark this branch and then a short distance above the number 2 branch, on the back side of the tree, find the number 3 branch. Continue this way until you are within the top 20% of the trunk. As you do this, the distance between selected branches should be getting smaller and the branches themselves should be getting thinner (in nature, thick branches grow on the lower part of a tree and are further apart than near the top). Once you reach the top 20% of the trunk you can select branches that are on all four sides of the tree.

You will notice in this procedure that there were no branches selected in the front of the tree until we reached the top 20% of the trunk. This is another of the tried-and-true Japanese rules. The reason for this is that the person viewing the tree should be able to see the trunk all the way from soil level up to the top

20% of it. If there were branches on the front side, the leaves on these branches would prevent an uninterrupted view of the trunk.

Having marked the first 4 or five branches, you can start at soil level and remove all other (not needed) branches between the soil level and the top branch that has been so marked. After marking the remaining branches all the way to the top of the tree, the remaining unneeded (unmarked) branches can be removed.

Congratulations! What you now have sitting in front of you is a bonsai that has received almost all of its first styling. The critical branches are all that are remaining on the trunk and you have actually done that job that you originally had no idea how to accomplish. It wasn't so bad after all, was it?

There are yet two jobs left to do before the tree is completely styled (branch pinching/shortening and wiring), but these are discussions for another article.