

GROUP PLANTING

CONTAINERS. Large ceramic pots can be expensive so consider whether a slab of stone or slate would be appropriate. Drainage holes are not mandatory in slabs unless there are hollows, which will hold water to cause root rot. Small holes for anchorage wires are useful but wire can be glued in place. The absence of walls on slabs will allow excess water to drain over the edges. If you wish to display your group away from home, keep the size down to something that you can lift without personal injury.

PLANTING MEDIUM. This needs to be no different to your usual bonsai mix but sometimes a clay/peat mix is used to hold the perimeter in place if on a slab.

SPECIES. Any material suitable for bonsai can be used. The majority of people will use only one species in a group planting but mixes with space between varieties work reasonably well. Even mixes of needle bearing trees and broadleaf have been used.

ACCESSORIES. Rock, accent plants and moss are useful, as are mounded soil levels to form an undulating landscape. Ceramic figures of animals, people and buildings are seldom used outside of China but this is a matter for the individual's preference and not a rule of thumb.

NUMBER OF TREES. It is more likely to achieve a harmonious design if an odd number is used up to a total of nine. Over and above that total, it is not as important.

GENERAL POSITIONING. This is simplified if trees of varying height, thickness and age are gathered together before starting. It is useful to have the largest one at about a third of the way along from one side and slightly behind a middle line. The next largest will be placed near to the first one or well away if it is to be the focal point of a secondary grouping. Experiment with placing on/in the container, bearing in mind that larger, thicker trees look nearer and smaller, thinner ones should be further behind affording a feeling of depth and distance. It is usual, particularly with smaller numbers, to ensure that three or more trees don't end up in a straight line. This would never occur in nature and after all, we're not planting a hedge. A water-course can be suggested by a trickle of sand. Trees with a side comparatively free of branches can be cuddled up together as shading one another would probably cause this naturally. Outside members of a group generally lean outwards away from the others as if reaching for light. There are no rules as to positioning but these suggestions will ensure a more natural design. An important point, space toward the front and/or side of the container, covered with sand or moss, helps the open landscape effect and the natural perspective. A mound or hummock helps to emphasize the major tree or group.

I have purposely refrained from including a planting plan, as I believe that the trees themselves will suggest an arrangement. The eventual plan has to be a balance between what the trees tell you and the personality of the planter. Go ahead, have a go at this. Individual plants can be moved or replaced even years afterward. Very often another arrangement is visualised at re-potting time. Most important of all, have fun.

= Don.