

Picking material

Assumptions

Skipping right past the "pick the species" and assuming that the plant picked up is suitable for bonsai. Whilst size counts, on this occasion ignore the size of the material for this first exercise. Further follow on threads may happen for the very big ones and the very little ones because there are differences at the extremes regarding characteristics. So an average sized tree - 25cm-50cm.

Positive attributes

When looking for good material look for a number of primary characteristics. It shouldn't really matter much whether it's an informal upright or cascade or whatever (bunjin excluded):

- Root flare/interesting roots
- Trunk movement i.e. an interesting shape to the whole tree.
- Trunk taper from roots to apex - significant girth is nice too.
- Branches with foliage near to the trunk.
- Lots of branches, ideally with no awkward gaps - and radiating around the whole tree (to provide depth).
- The branches must start as low as possible to the roots to give the most options. They must start no higher (or further) than 1/3 from the existing roots to the "target" height.
- Excellent health (abundant fresh green foliage).

Negative attributes

If your plant doesn't have ALL of the positive attributes, it can still be a worthwhile subject as long as it doesn't ALSO have many negatives from the next list.

Actively avoid (again bunjin is "special") these features:

- Long straight sections of trunk or branches.
- Particularly thin trunks (seedlings excepted).
- Sparse branching and/or odd branch placement (branches on inside bends or all on one side etc.).
- 2 dimensional structure (either flat structure or without back branches to provide depth).
- Odd or unnatural bends in trunks.
- Awkward or unbalanced roots.
- if there is movement in the trunk, it needs to start at the root level (not first straight and then movement above).
- There should be no obvious chop point or chop scars.
- Avoid spoke branching - all branches coming from one point on the trunk.
- Avoid trunks (or branches) with "odd" taper - either from very thick to very thin or an inverse taper (gets thicker at some point above the roots or along a branch).

http://www.artofbonsai.org/feature_articles/rules.php

A few thoughts on selecting styling competition material, based on the fact that the purpose of entering is to create a reasonable-looking bonsai in one or two styling sessions.

To do this you will need material that is pretty much there already, and just needs pruning and wiring. Obviously you can forget any growing on or further development, there is no time for that. You will be taking a plant, and by reduction and repositioning turn it into a bonsai.

The very first thing is to restrict your search to suitable species. No point looking at magnolia or leylandii, for example.

Suitable species can include: potentilla, spiraea, cotoneaster, prunus, buxus, pyracantha, acer, ligustrum, lonicera, picea.

A good first thing to look for is a trunk at least as thick as your index finger, and then low branching that is in proportion to the trunk. By in proportion I mean a reasonably thick first branch, with branches further up being thinner. You don't want a skinny first branch and then a very thick one near the top of the tree, it doesn't look right.

Then you need to dig down into the soil and check the roots, most garden centre stock is buried up to its neck in compost and sometimes you can find another 2 inches of trunk under the soil (don't be embarrassed at the funny looks that you get while digging down, and take some wet wipes with you for cleaning up afterwards). You are looking for a nice even spread all around, and all coming from the same height on the trunk. You don't want any flying roots, ones that emerge from the trunk much higher than the rest of them.

Your selection will need to have short internodes that are short distances between forks in the trunk and branches. Ideally the internodes need to decrease as you progress up the trunk, and out along the branches.

And if you can find a plant that matches all those criteria then you will probably be able to enter it into any bonsai competition in the world and win hands down.

The point is, such perfect material doesn't exist. Not in a dozen years of trawling literally dozens and dozens of garden centres have I found the perfect material as described above.

So what to do? You have to compromise. You have to look for what can be altered or repositioned, and what you can cut off. It's all about creation by reduction.

If you can't find a thick trunk, look for a thinner one that you can put some movement into with wire.

If the primary branches are out of proportion, look for the possibility that this can be put right by pruning the offending ones away.

The same for roots, if there is a flying root look to see if it can be removed or even worked into the design.

If there is a gaping hole in one area look to see if you can wire a branch into it.

Sometimes a bit of lateral thinking is required. Several small, thinner plants can make a nice group and still be under budget. A taller thin plant might look good growing up the side of a tall rock, or even cascading down the side.

That should be enough information to get the ball rolling, hopefully some of the others who have been through this process can add to it.

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