

## **Extract taken from 'bonsai4me'**

The literal meaning of bonsai is 'plant in a tray'. While the tree itself contributes to one half of the composition, the pot completes the overall image. The 'bonsai' in its literal sense is judged by the visual impact of both the tree and the pot.

Unfortunately, choosing and locating the correct, or the best, pot to plant your tree into is not easy. While a well-chosen pot will enhance a bonsai and strengthen a design, a poorly chosen or unsuitable design can actually lessen the impact of the tree. Ultimately, until the 'right' pot is found, the tree will never reach its full potential as a bonsai.

A pot can be expensive investment for your bonsai; buying an unsuitable pot for your tree can mean having to find a more suitable pot in the future. Finding the right pot, first time, is not only satisfying but saves money and helps avoid ending up with a pile of pots that don't quite seem to suit any of your trees!

This article is written to help the enthusiast understand how to go about choosing the correct pot for their tree. My express thanks go to Vic Harris of [Erin Bonsai](#) for his help in writing this guide and for providing images of some of his pots to illustrate this article.

### **Choosing the right pot for your tree**

Choosing the best pot for a particular tree is not easy. As well as the more mundane factory-made Chinese and Korean pots there are a number of bonsai potters and potteries throughout the world that are able to offer individual and diverse pot designs and glazes to the enthusiast. There are so many available colours, sizes and designs that it can become very difficult to identify exactly which one(s) are best for your tree.

Pot choice is also subjective, ultimately some of the final decision will be made according to your own personal tastes. Some enthusiasts prefer more conservative pot shapes, textures and glazes, other enthusiasts prefer to make more unusual 'individual' choices.

In an effort to help choose the correct 'type' of pot for your tree I have asked Vic Harris to help me draw up some basic guidelines when choosing a new pot for your tree.

To arrive at a good decision, it is useful to break down the choices into 4 parts. Pot dimension, pot shape, pot colour and Texture

#### **Choice 1: Pot Dimensions**

The first thing to consider is the size of the pot that you will need. The correct pot dimensions can be achieved using some basic rules according to the dimensions of the tree itself.

The *general* rule of thumb is that the pots depth should be equal to the diameter of the trunk just above soil level.  
For oval or rectangular pots, the length of the pot should be 2/3 the height of the tree.  
For round pots, the diameter of the pot should be 1/3 the height of the tree.  
For trees with especially wide canopies a wider pot can be necessary and this can be compensated by using a slightly shallower pot.  
As equally, a tree with a very thick trunk (in comparison with the height of the tree) may suit a slightly deeper but narrower pot.

It should be remembered that these guidelines are based on aesthetics only. For horticultural reasons, some tree species require larger or smaller pots. Species with very fast growing roots such as Trident Maples often require deeper pots whilst flowering and fruiting species such as Crab Apples require more root run and therefore deeper pots.

## **Choice 2: Pot Shape**

The style of pot that you choose will need to harmonise with the tree. You need to take a look at your tree and evaluate it's characteristics. Try to decide whether your tree is masculine or feminine. Many trees are a combination of both although usually one is dominant than the other. This is very subjective; for some people a tree may be masculine, for others, it might be feminine. Ultimately as the owner of the tree it is for you to decide. It should be noted though that a firmly masculine tree will never look right in a very feminine oval pot; in turn a feminine tree will always look awkward in a masculine pot.

What makes a tree feminine or masculine?

A masculine tree gives an impression of strength, it might have a heavily tapered trunk, have craggy, mature bark, strong angular branching, it may have deadwood. It may have a straight, powerful trunk or a dense canopy.

A feminine tree will have a more delicate appearance, a smooth trunk line, smooth bark, sinuous movement in it's trunk and branches. A light canopy and slow taper. Some tree species are predisposed to being considered feminine or masculine; Pines or angular Hawthorns are often considered masculine whereas delicate Japanese Maples will be considered as naturally feminine.

However, a strong, heavily tapered Japanese Maple with delicate leaves and branching could be considered to be a feminine species with masculine features, whilst a tall Hawthorn with craggy, rough bark, gentle curves and very gradual taper could be considered a masculine species with a feminine characteristics. With trees such as these it is necessary to identify which is the strongest feature and reflect it. Is it the craggy, fissured bark of the hawthorn or the gentle curves of the trunk that have the strongest visual impact? Is it the delicate branching of the Maple or the powerful tapered trunk that attracts your eye most?

Fortunately, it is possible to find pot designs that can reflect both femininity and masculinity.

Pots are considered feminine or masculine. Deep pots with strong angular features are considered masculine whilst more feminine pots are shallower with softer lines. For instance, strong chunky, deep rectangles with sharp corners are very masculine pots, as are square pots. These are suited to thick heavy trunked masculine trees, especially conifers.

For thick-trunked deciduous trees, the corners of the rectangle can be rounded thus reducing the masculinity of the pot a little.

Working down through the scale of masculinity, deep chunky ovals come next and then we have drums/round pots that are androgynous i.e are suitable for a masculine or feminine tree.

After this we move into the feminine pots which are shallow delicate ovals and very shallow round literati pots.

### **Pot Shape Basic Guidelines**

Rectangular pots are suitable for coniferous species and big deciduous trees with very pronounced taper, wide base, heavy buttressed nebari. These are used for masculine trees to add a feeling of strength in the tree

Oval pots Suitable for reflecting the femininity of deciduous trees, clump style bonsai, groves and forests. The less taper the tree has the more feminine it tends to become, sinuous curves can also dampen the masculinity of a tree.

Round. Suitable for coniferous or deciduous feminine trees, particularly (but not exclusively) for literati/bunjin trees. Tall straight or sinuously curved trees with very little taper are the most feminine and the pots that tend to suit these trees are very shallow rounds.

### **Pot Lip or Rim**

A lip on the upper rim gives additional strength to a masculine tree.

A straight rim is softer for more androgynous trees

A bowl/convex side is more suited to feminine trees

### **Pot Corners**

Sharp, right-angled corners are masculine and suitable for masculine trees

Indented corners on a rectangular pot soften the masculinity of a pot.

Rounded corners softens the pot further, beginning to resemble a oval pot and more suitable for masculine deciduous trees

### **Feet of pot**

The main purpose of feet on a bonsai pot is to allow for good drainage and airflow, but feet can also be used to change the pots appearance. Feet can be subtle and decorative or strong and robust. These qualities can be used to influence the over all feel of the pot, big chunky feet can add strength to the design and understated delicate feet will have the opposite effect.

### **Choice 3: Pot Colour**

Once you have decided on the shape of the pot, next you need to think of the colour and texture.

Every tree is unique, although it is possible to generalise about a particular species, each individual tree will have something to pick up on as no two trees are exactly the same and there are always small variations that can be brought out in the pot colour and texture.

The colour of the pot can be used to pick up on a feature of the tree and therefore helps the tree and pot colour 'work' well together. The colour in the tree that is complimented can be that of the bark, for instance an unglazed red/brown pot picking up the bark of a Juniper. It can compliment the colour of the leaves through the summer or the autumn colour. On fruiting or flowering trees, the colour of the pot can be used to compliment the colour of the flowers or the berries.

## Pot Examples



A very masculine pot with sharp corners, strong feet and a rough texture. This pot would suit thick trunked pines. The dark brown/rusty textured unglazed finish would compliment the rough bark of most coniferous trees.



Slightly less masculine pot. Soft cornered rectangle, no lip, inconspicuous feet, this pot with it's blue / gray glaze would suit a heavy trunk Acer.



This pot although an oval still has some masculine qualities, it is deep and has a strong outward square lip. With its red / pink glaze this pot would suit a flowering tree with a heavy trunk such as an Azalea.



Next we have a drum, suitable for masculine or feminine trees. With this grey glaze, this particular pot would suit a Hawthorn, Oak or even a European Larch.



Here we have a feminine oval with a very gentle curved profile and a cream / beige glaze, any of the lighter coloured more delicate trunk deciduous trees, with smooth bark would look good in this

pot, acers, beech, ash.



Lastly, we have a shallow round literati style pot, although this a feminine style, often the trees used for this style have masculine features i.e rough bark and this is taken into account by adding a rough texture to the pot. This pot would suit literati style junipers and pines with the rusty browns and verdigris unglazed finish.

## Examples of pot colour combination with bonsai by Harry Harrington



**Spiraea**, Generally group or multiple trunk bonsai suit shallow pots, these types of pot give a sense of space and help to create perspective and depth. This pot picks up on the colour of the bark with a very close match of colours, I also felt that it would be nice to emphasise the contorted trunks with movement in the pot.



**European Larch**. This pot is unglazed and coloured with layers of grey and brown slip. This has given the pot a finish that is very close to colour and texture of the bark.



**Acer palmatum/ Mountain Maple.** Here we have a delicate feminine oval pot with a subtle off white glaze which is quite understated and compliments the varying colour phases of this trees foliage through out the year.



Privet. Here we have something that is a bit out of the ordinary, Harry and I worked closely on the design for this pot together. Harry saw a twisted nightmare scene in the contorted exposed roots of this bonsai. Even though this pot makes a strong statement, it completely harmonises with tree. The colours and texture are a perfect extension of the tree .



Here we have a cascade Hawthorn. The was designed with carved portion to the front to mimic a rocky cliff or mountainside which the sort of terrain where this style of tree would be found growing naturally.

Although you generally want the colour and texture of a pot to match some characteristic of the tree, sometimes contrasts can work very well, for example, the red leaves of a red-leaved trees work well with a blue pot.

The colour can also be used to accentuate the energy of the tree. Warm colours such as browns, reds, oranges and yellows provide a feeling of warmth and stability to the tree whereas cold colours such as blues and greens can balance and refresh the overall composition.

Warm and cold colours can be used to contrast with a bonsai. Warm colours can be used for tiny (mame-sized) bonsai to exaggerate their colour whereas cool colours can be used to tone down bright-leaved species.

### **Basic Guide to Tree/ Pot colour combinations**

This is a very basic guide designed to be a starting point or general guide to colours that can be suitable for any given tree and of course the final choice can be altered to suit the individual characteristics of any given tree.

Light browns/Oatmeals-

Acer, Elm, Beech, Oak, Larch, Hawthorn, Ash ,gingko

Off whites/Grey's-

Hawthorn,Oak,Acer,Ash

Light greens

Acer, ash ,beech

Dark greens

Acer, Azaleas, Chinese elm, cotoneaster

Medium Browns-

Elm,Birch ,Mountain Ash, Acer

Dark Browns/Red Browns/Unglazed Reds/Browns

Pine,Juniper,Cotoneaster,Larch and other conifers,Azaleas

Light blue

Azaleas, Malus and other flowering species

Matt Blues-

Acer,Juniper,Pine,Azaleas

Matt Blue/Greens-

Pine,Junipers,Acer, Azaleas (this combination will also suit just about any tree as they are the colours that you see most trees framed by when in their natural state )

#### **Choice 4: Pot Texture**

Textures in a pot are again used to compliment a tree. Smooth clay finishes are suitable for more feminine trees whereas heavily textured pots bring out the masculinity and wildness in a tree.

## Texture examples



This pot is very textured, it has a very coarse, gritty feel to it and would be suitable for most pines.



This pot has a smooth glaze but lots of texture added to the lower portion of the pot, this is an interesting way of adding texture to a pot and mirrors the composition of the tree itself, with the glaze complementing the foliage and the unglazed portion picking up on the trunk and this pot would suit semi cascade style junipers or pines



This pot has texture within the glaze itself, the sort of softer textures found in some deciduous trees that develop subtle texture as they mature. Trees like beech, oak, mountain ash.



This pot is very smooth and has quite gentle feminine feel to it and would suit Acers, beech or ash

## **Conclusion**

As can be seen in this article, choosing the correct pot is not simple but it can be learnt. Ultimately, a combination of personal tastes, knowledge and experience makes the process much easier.

When buying pots for your bonsai try to make sure you know the pot measurements needed for a tree. It is no good buying a suitable pot only to find it is too big or small for your tree.

Have a good idea of the shape that will suit the masculinity or femininity of your tree. Have a good idea of the colours and textures that will suit your tree.

Don't be embarrassed to ask the advice of the bonsai nursery or the potter you are buying from, an experienced potter or bonsai nursery will always be able to give you a choice of suitable pots to choose from. However, always try to have a picture of your tree to hand as this makes the nursery or potter's job much, much easier!

reference

**Article taken from 'Bonsai4me' -**

**<http://www.bonsai4me.com/AdvTech/ATChoosing%20the%20Right%20Pot%20for%20your%20Bonsai.htm>**