

Basic Steps in Creating a Bonsai

Pauline F. Muth: copyright 1990, last revision 2003

This is designed as a reminder of the process of designing a bonsai. I presume that you have had basic lessons so that the process makes sense!

1. Examine the tree carefully to determine the best rootage and front of the tree.

- Place your tree on a turntable. Remove the pot or trim the pot down to clearly see the bottom of the trunk. Do not disturb the majority of the root system.
- During this process, do NOT let the root system dry out.
- Using your fingers, chopstick, root hook and other tools locate the true base of the trunk. This is where the roots begin their spread. This is often buried deep in a nursery pot. Sometime you will have to remove a single or too high placed root or low branches that will not work in the design. Check for roots that overlap or wrap around the trunk. These will have to be straightened or removed so that they do not eventually strangle the plant.
- Choose the best-looking rootage area for your front and mark it with wire or a stick. Often this is the base that appears the widest.
- Be sure to check the trunk line. The tree must not bend away from the front. Sometimes this can be corrected by repotting at a different angle. Use wedges under the pot to slant the tree in different directions as you consider the fronts.
- Also look for a trunk line that will allow you to develop good 1st, 2nd and 3rd branches.

2. Examine the tree to determine which bonsai style you will develop.

- Begin by finding the main trunk line. Start at the base and follow it through its best taper (decreasing size of the trunk) to the apex (top point). This apex may be created using a side branch, thus eliminating its natural apex. You may find more than one trunk line. If this is the case, a multiple trunk style or remove all but one trunk to style a single trunk style.
- The front of the tree should show the best view of the trunk, while the sides and back should have good branches and visual depth. Often it is easier to locate the back. Just look for great depth branching.
- It is helpful to clean up the tree: that is to take off all branches that cannot be used in good design. (E.g. crossing branches, upward and hanging sub branches, branches at the top which are heavier than those at the bottom)

3. Prune to design your bonsai.

(The rules described here are the classic rules of bonsai and will develop a good tree however, after much practice with the rules, experiment, and you may develop a wonderful treatment of your own.)

- Begin at the bottom of the line and prune for design. The first branch, either on the left or right of at the front, should be the heaviest and longest branch. It should be about one third of the eventual height of the finished tree.
- The second branch should be at another height either on the opposite side or at the back of the tree.
- The third branch should be at the place not occupied by the second branch (side or back.)
- Subsequent branches will decrease in length and girth as you design up the tree. Each branch needs its own place in the sun as you look down on the design.
- Branches may be in the front when you reach eye level, but never poking straight out at you.
- The total design should have a triangular shape with the apex at the top point of the triangle.
- Each branch must also be shaped to give a flattened plane with an all over-triangular shape. Remember that a tree's branches will stay in the same place you see them...they will only grow in girth.

4. Wire the tree.

- Secure the tree to your turntable and begin wiring for shape at the bottom of the tree.
- Remember to keep the 45-degree angle in your wire and do not cross wires. Use only as heavy a wire as needed for each trunk or branch.

- If you will be reshaping the trunk, apply that wire first.
 - Remember to carefully place the wires as growth occurs so that you will not harm new buds you will need.
 - Check to wind the wires in the direction needed for changing branch placement.
- 5. Bend the wires to place the trunk and branches into the wanted positions.**
- Remember that all branches must be at the same angle since the forces of nature have acted on all of them.
 - Be sure that branches off the trunk are on the outside of angles.
 - It is at this stage that you put your artist vision into full play...give your bonsai motion.
 - Take care to support the wires as you carefully apply pressure to make your bends.
 - At this point, you may need to modify your trimming of the tree.
- 6. Select the correct container.**
- Choose a container that will compliment your tree's foliage, flowers or fruit.
 - The style of the tree will determine the shape of the container.
 - The depth of the container will be determined by the trunk size, the visual weight of the tree and the moisture and root requirements of the tree.
 - The pot must not dominate the tree. Bonsai is a tree in a tray.
- 7. IF it is the correct time of the year to pot your particular tree, remove the soil; trim the roots and pot the tree.**
- Prepare the pot with screen and the holding wires first.
 - Put on vinyl or latex gloves at this point because some of the ingredients you will be using can be harmful to your body.
 - Then, using your chopstick or root hook, carefully remove the soil from the root ball. Some species work well with all soil removed, others transplant better if some of the original soil is left.
 - You may trim off the same proportion of root mass as the mass of the foliage you removed from the top of the tree. Be careful not to remove critical root mass supporting the foliage. Learn about the species you are working with first so that you do not damage the tree by root pruning too much.
 - Put the correct bonsai soil in the pot along with organic fertilizer, micronutrients, iron, and myco-rhizoids.
 - Sprinkle the root mass with rooting hormone and place the mass in the correct position in the pot. Add more soil and secure the tree with the wires front and back of the trunk.
 - As you add soil, use your chopstick to remove air pockets.
 - Soak the freshly potted tree in a water and transplanting mixture.
 - Keep the newly potted tree in semi shade for one week, and then move to its growing location.
- 8. Remember to keep your design and develop it further by**
- Trimming the new branches
 - Giving the bonsai proper light and humidity
 - Fertilizing and adding appropriate nutrients for the species
 - Watering
 - Transplanting the tree each year when it is young (later it may only need this every few years) including root pruning when transplanting

Questions or comments? Contact Pauline@pfmbonsai.com
pfm bonsai studio 7 Western Ave, West Charlton, NY 12010