

About Bonsai “Rules” and About Bonsai Styling as a Discovery Process

By Jack Wikle

The word “rules” used in connection with bonsai has always made me cringe. “Rules” are for contests like football, tennis or bridge – do it this way or be penalized. The term “guidelines” seems much more comfortable -- guidelines being insights that have grown out of lots of experimentation over many years. Understanding that you don’t have to do it that way, being aware of some of the commonly offered guidelines can be very helpful in decision making and in problem solving -- especially when you are not happy with your tree and not sure why.

Like painting a picture or writing a story, there is no one way to style a bonsai. John Naka (the very famous Japanese-American bonsai artist and teacher) says it well, “Where one person will find a dragon, someone else will find a race horse . . . they are both nice. But, don’t try to make a dragon and a race horse at the same time.” Ultimately, any bonsai is its grower’s personal statement, rather than some kind of test of his or her ability to follow a recipe.

To begin work on raw material with the idea of making it a certain style, or, even more confining, of creating a tree just like the one pictured on page 37 of your bonsai book, is not what usually happens. More often, the resulting bonsai is something partly or mostly unforeseen, something discovered in searching for ways to make the most of the material at hand. Stated in another way, bonsai styling is not so much about what you would like to have as it is about what you can do with what you have. As Bruce Baker puts it so succinctly, “Bonsai styles are descriptive, not proscriptive.”

Typically, the initial styling process begins with exploration, with thoughtful study, with becoming “intimately” familiar with one’s material. This means examining your plant from every possible perspective, twisting it, turning it, and tipping it left and right while pushing the foliage and branches aside to see what is really there – all the while, keeping in mind that this tree does not have to grow with its trunk at the same angle it has been growing. What can you find that you like? What do you find that you don’t like? How can you accentuate what you find pleasing? How can you disguise or eliminate what is uncomfortable?

This is kind of a joke but it is serious too, my two sentence recipe for guaranteed styling success. “Cut off everything you don’t like and you have to like what’s left.” “If you have nothing left, go get another plant and follow my recipe.” Sounds simplistic? Sure it is, but this is very much what I do myself. Actually, it’s not too different from the story I like to tell about the young couple visiting an artist who carved duck decoys. They were so impressed by his work that one of them blurted out, “I don’t know how you do that!” The artist’s reaction was, “Well,

it's really very simple, I just take a block of wood and cut away everything that doesn't look like a duck." Sure, that is what we do with our bonsai isn't it? We take a woody plant (tree, shrub or vine) and cut away anything that doesn't look like an old or interesting tree. We are sculpting living material.

The effect of a lot of what we do in styling bonsai is simplification – “less is more.” In many ways this is much like editing a long article. Discarding a few pages will almost always make it better, more compelling. Scratching out two or three more paragraphs makes it better yet, easier to comprehend. Finally, going back and questioning the need for each word used, then eliminating those that aren't necessary, really sharpens the whole presentation.

Interestingly, when I am honestly in doubt about whether to eliminate part of a branch, or a branch, or even most of the top of a tree, if I make that cut, I almost always like the tree better. This is a pattern I recognized long before I began to understand what was happening. It was simplification. I was making a more basic, a more easily grasped statement. “When in doubt, cut it out.” That's my guideline.

Of course, in following these simple formulas, there is always the possibility of cutting off something you may want later. As one lady cautioned me, “My mother always told me, you can't cut it back on.” Or, from a man (smiling), “I don't want to find that I've cut it twice and it's still too short.” Well, you get the idea. But be encouraged remembering that trees grow and some of those things you remove can be re-grown -- eventually. However, be cautioned that the larger the cut, the longer it will take for that wood to be replaced. So be thoughtful! But, when you are honestly in doubt, cut!

In cutting off what you don't want, be wary of leaving “equals” such as equal branch lengths, foliage masses of equal volumes or even equal-appearing spaces between branches. Having two or more tree parts, or even spaces, so similar in size and shape that one can't be distinguished from the other (like matched candle sticks, horns of an ox or mirror images), is almost never as “natural” appearing, as interesting, as is variation in size and form. When working with two units (two shoots at the end of a branch or whatever) a dominate/subordinate relationship is more comfortable and more interesting than visual equals (like the image of a sergeant and a corporal versus the image of two sergeants). If it's three units, remember the three bears in the Goldilocks story. The “orderly hierarchy” of big bear, little bear and middle-size bear is a much more interesting group than three bears so much alike you can't tell them apart.

Too much order, everything the same, over and over, is monotony. At the other extreme, too much disorder, no repetition of anything, is chaos. Our goal is a balance pleasing to us somewhere between monotony and chaos. Again, this is our choice, our personal statement. The balance that satisfies me may be quiet

and comfortable. The balance that pleases you may be edgy and exciting. Something in between can be nice too.

Be aware that this idea of balance in bonsai applies not just to styling (“How short should I cut that branch? How much should I pull it down? How tall should my tree be?”). It applies to horticulture as well (“How much watering is too much? How much water is too little? How much fertilizer is too much? How much fertilizer is too little?”). As Doctor Heston likes to remind me the real issue here is “dosage.” And, John Naka again, “Of course you all know that too much is too much . . . and too little is too little . . . and just right is just right.”

Yes! But how do we find that pleasing balance? How can we identify “just right”? The struggle seems never ending in almost the same way that a bonsai is never really finished. What seemed so right yesterday becomes uncomfortable, even annoying, today. As our tree grows our perceptions and our tastes change too. For me, I have found it very helpful, when I am having difficulty making a design or a horticulture decision, to ask myself, “Well, what would be unquestionably too much and then what is unquestionably too little?” Then I try what is about halfway between these extremes.

To summarize, learn from your material, being open to insight that just bubbles up unexpectedly, and don't let yourself be handcuffed by someone else's “rules” or guidelines. At the same time be alert for useful guidelines, the kind that make sense to you. Follow them when it's comfortable and violate them with a clear conscience when it's not, feeling free to explore your own tastes and sensitivity. After all, how are you going to sharpen your instincts if you don't follow them sometimes?

Having read this far, some people, especially beginners, will find themselves thinking, “OK! OK! But I still don't know where to start. Can you be more specific?” Watch next month's “View” column for a summary of those styling guidelines I have found most helpful.

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