

Some Guidelines, Not “Rules”, for Initial Bonsai Styling

By Jack Wikle

Start with a healthy plant. Keep in mind that the healthier your stock plant and the greater its stored reserves, the more you can “get away with” in one styling operation. Given a choice, work with the healthiest plant available rather than the individual struggling to survive. If you want a big trunk, start with a big trunk; trunk thickening is very slow in a pot. Working with a plant well established in a container has the advantage of lots of roots close to the trunk base. This allows removal of those roots that don’t fit well in a bonsai pot small enough to make the tree look big. Also keep in mind that there can be advantages in growing promising stock in a pot a year or two before styling it just to get acquainted with how the plant grows, how it responds to you and to your care and how you respond to it.

Get acquainted before you cut. Explore your material thoroughly before cutting anything. In beginning your work, remove only as much foliage and as many small branches as necessary to allow you to see the trunk and basic branching pattern comfortably. Study the “line” of the trunk from its base to the branch tips farthest from the soil to see how the trunk moves and where each significant branch is attached. Scrape away the soil at the trunk base to find out whether the trunk flares as it enters the soil and where the uppermost roots are located. What can you find that is pleasing? What do you find that is uncomfortable? Is the form of a mature tree already lurking somewhere within this stock plant just waiting to be “cut” free? It is more common for bonsai to be “created” by beginning with larger plants and pruning them small than by starting with small plants and growing them big.

Find a front. Is there any clearly best view that maximizes basal trunk flare and reveals an attractive trunk line while displaying a pleasing -- reasonably orderly but not monotonous -- branch arrangement? If you find perfection, great! If not, what’s the “best” of the less than perfect views? That “best” view will usually serve very well as the “front” of your tree – until you discover a front that excites you even more. Think of the front as the tree’s face in the sense of being its most expressive and most interesting view. Training a bonsai with a front in mind is simply doing everything possible to reveal and maximize its best visual qualities. The classic quip of the famous Japanese American bonsai artist John Naka is, “If you can’t find a front, find the back. The other side is the front.” Some bonsai actually have two fronts, two almost equally pleasing views of that tree. This can be very nice and, when it is possible, make the most of the opportunity.

Think about tree size and potential for profile reduction. Another important issue to be considered almost simultaneously with finding a tree’s front is to envision its size as a bonsai. To make the most of the material, how tall will it be and how far will its branches spread? Anything done to shrink a tree’s silhouette by shortening its branches and cutting back its top will increase apparent trunk size. Whenever possible, there is something to

be gained by cutting both lateral branches and the tree's top back to less than the "just right" dimensions one envisions. If cut to "just right" lengths, as soon as the branches grow out some, they will be beyond just right. If cut shorter than just right, they will be just right as they grow.

Consider bolder pruning for more dramatic impact. Be alert too for any opportunity to exaggerate trunk taper by cutting the main trunk back to a secondary trunk or to a strong side branch that can become the new top. At the extreme, this could even mean removing the main trunk back to its lowest branch and leaving that branch to become the new top of the tree. Watch also for opportunities to shorten branches and exaggerate their taper in the same way. With lots of branches to choose from, there may be a possibility to make the trunk visually thicker by removing all its heaviest branches -- especially those almost as thick as the trunk -- and leave only those smaller branches pleasingly in proportion to the trunk.

Remove "Clearly Useless" and "C-word" stuff early. Actually, any branch, or any part of the tree, that you just can't imagine using is a strong candidate for quick removal. Keep in mind, however, that some unusual formations, the kinds of things that will make your tree stand out among dozens of others at a glance, can be pronounced assets. Don't be too quick in cutting off what is absolutely unique. Next, focus on those branches best described by bonsai styling "C-words" like: "crossing," "competing," "cluttering," "conflicting," "congesting," or "confusing." The big concern here is too many branches trying to occupy the same space. The solution, again, is eliminating what isn't needed.

Correct these undesirable branching patterns. OK, if you have read this far, examined your material thoughtfully, and still haven't removed a branch, try looking for branching patterns long-recognized as undesirable. Search for each in turn and make corrections as you go.

1. Parallel branches. When one branch originates directly above or below another branch, growing in a way that has a "piggy-back" or "railroad track" effect, the tree's form will almost always be improved if one of the two branches is eliminated.
2. Opposite branches, "cross arms," "bar branches." When branches grow from the trunk directly opposite each other, looking like cross arms on a utility pole, removing one or the other from each pair will often enhance the tree's aesthetic impact. In contrast to cross arms which stop the viewer's eye at each intersection, an alternating branch pattern leads one's eye quickly and comfortably up the tree.
3. "Slingshot" branches or slingshot trunk formations. Equal or almost equal branches or trunks growing upward together, give a feeling of visual tension, of competition. A more comfortable composition is often the result if one arm of the slingshot is either removed or shortened. In some cases, the slingshot syndrome can be remedied by tipping the tree so that one arm of the slingshot is almost parallel

with the soil. Suddenly the feeling of competition is diminished; each branch is going its own way – one up, the other out.

4. “Wheel spoke” branches. Like an exaggeration of the opposite branch problem, a ring or collar of branches completely encircling a trunk is confusing and congesting at any level but it is especially uncomfortable on the lower part of a tree’s trunk. The best remedy is to remove most of the branches from a wheel spoke grouping leaving just one or two while avoiding a cross arm look.
5. “Rocketing” branches. Anything shooting, sucker-like, almost vertically upward is uncomfortable. Remove or reposition.
6. Dangling branches. Any branch hanging almost straight down is a distraction too. Again, reposition or eliminate.

Doing nothing more than correcting these six undesirable branching patterns can often produce a very creditable beginning bonsai.

Beware of T.B.B.s. It is very easy to overdo removal of weak interior growth near the bases of a tree’s main branches. At the extreme the effect is that of hollowing out your tree’s canopy leaving little more than tufts of foliage at the branch ends. The result is a “pompon” or “poodle tail” look. John Naka refers to these stiff, knobbed formations as “T.B.B.s” -- toilet brush branches. It will almost always work better to focus on shortening your tree’s branches and establishing foliage masses closer to its trunk than to inadvertently create T.B.B.s.

Lower the branches. Still not happy with your creation? Consider tying down or wiring down most -- or even all -- of the tree’s branches to positions almost horizontal, horizontal, or even below horizontal. This process can, almost magically, alter the appearance of a bonsai. Pulling branches down gives trees an aged appearance quickly. The lowest (oldest) branches are lowered first and farthest. Maintaining the same downward angle or slightly diminishing it as you move up the tree, branch to branch, works well. Another major, although not so obvious, advantage in swinging branches down is that branch ends – where most of the foliage is located -- are moved much closer to the trunk in the process. Also, the lowered branch seems shorter visually. Swinging branches dramatically downward – tightening the opening between the lowest branches and the soil – can also visually shorten an uncomfortably long trunk. Wiring is a very effective technique for lowering and shortening -- even compressing -- branches and their foliage masses with great precision. Adequately wired, a branch can be pulled down, then shortened significantly by creating extra bends, both left and right and up and down – no two waves just alike. This is especially true of conifers which are usually more flexible than broad-leaved trees.

Left branch, right branch, back branch, 1-2-3 in an upward spiral. If you have three useful branches remaining on your tree, consider yourself fortunate. Three branches supported by a trunk growing on up beyond them are enough to make an excellent bonsai. Many nice bonsai have been done with less. Ideally, the first branch will be attached about one third of the

distance up the trunk and each succeeding branch, moving upward, will be attached somewhat higher and not lie directly above any of the branches below.

Bonsai literature commonly refers to these basic-three branches as “number one,” the lowest and ideally the longest and heaviest, going right or left and somewhat forward toward the viewer; “number two,” growing to the other side and somewhat toward the viewer; and “number three,” projecting to the rear giving the tree depth (something in each third of the circle seen in looking down on the tree from directly above). The “open armed welcome” or “embracing” positioning of branches one and two tends to direct or draw the viewer’s attention to the tree’s interior especially its trunk.

If one is lucky enough to have a tree with more than three branches, the sequence is continued moving up the tree, each branch somewhat higher than the one below it and positioned so it is not directly above any of the branches farther down. The result is a rhythmic upward spiral of branches. Not leaving any branch directly above another branch has value beyond making the tree look good. It’s healthier too for each branch to have its place in the sun.

Introduce openings. Yes, we are shaping or sculpting trees but we are also sculpting space, a very important part of the composition. If possible, having the spacing between branches begin fairly large and gradually diminish moving upward to the top of the tree will add greatly to the visual impact. All in all, a billowing or broken outline, even a somewhat open look, seems more pleasing, more interesting, than a hard-profile, shaped-by-a-cookie-cutter kind of styling. Furthermore, significant openings, to let light and air into the interior of the foliage canopy, promote and strengthen interior growth. John Naka’s much quoted way of expressing it, “You need space for the birds and butterflies.”

Refine the apex (tip the top). After working one’s way branch by branch up to the tree’s highest point, establishing an apex there becomes important and challenging. The bonsai will almost always have greater impact if the handling of the apex is a result of thoughtful consideration rather than uncritical acceptance of what the tree does on its own. The more formal the tree, the more vertical its trunk and the more triangular its profile, the more appropriate a relatively pointed apex, oriented straight up or almost straight up, seems to be. The more informal tree with pronounced trunk bends or a definite lean seems better suited by a rounded apex. This mound-like top is typically a unit composed of multiple, small branches spreading more or less horizontally.

Of course, in early styling, a pointed apex will often have to suffice until enough fine branching is available to do a rounded version. As a starting point for making a pointed apex less severe, there may be an opportunity to “roll over” or “wire over” the uppermost shoot, swinging it down to a horizontal

position (or even slightly below horizontal). By making the sharpest part of the bend just above a branch, the strong shoot becomes a branch and the former branch can be lifted to become the new apex. This “roll over” technique is also very useful in lowering the height of a bonsai in an attractive way.

Unless the tree is extremely formal and straight-trunked, the absolutely vertical apex is usually avoided in favor of an apex that, if not “bowing,” at least “nods” slightly toward the viewer. The bowing or nodding of a tree’s apex toward its front may be the most universally accepted and consistently followed of all bonsai styling guidelines. Having a tree’s apex tipped somewhat forward rather than falling away from the viewer – like the “welcoming” positioning of the tree’s main branches – helps direct the viewer’s attention to the tree and its trunk. This is not to suggest that the apex should not lean somewhat left or somewhat right at the same time it nods toward the viewer. If the overall flow of the tree is left to right, consider adjusting the apex to move right also. If the flow is right to left, try pushing the apex to the left. What gives the tree a sense of movement pleasing to you? Remember it’s your statement. “There is no one way.”

What’s next? It may be best to let the tree recover now. Let it grow out a little. The cycle of work and recovery through several stages usually succeeds better than insisting on immediate perfection. Take time to enjoy the process as well as the product.

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