

Fundamental Concepts about Bonsai Design

There are five basic styles of bonsai, identified by the Japanese in the late 19th century: ***Formal Upright, Informal Upright, Slanting, Partial Cascade and Full Cascade***. There are at least twenty more variations on these five, each with their own Japanese names, if you wish to impress your friends. Images of the five basic styles are attached to this document. If you have a piece of raw material that you want to use to create your bonsai, you may wish to use one of these basic styles as a format. These styles are GUIDELINES, not rules.

There are some basic styling guidelines that are helpful for beginners to create an attractive tree. They are suggestions based upon centuries of observations. Some of these common rules:

- A bonsai has a ***front*** and a back. The front is the most interesting angle to view the tree. Selecting the front is the first step in designing any bonsai.
- The trunk and surface roots (***nebari***) ***define the style and largely determine the front***
- The trunk should taper from bottom to top and a bulge (reverse taper) above the trunk is unsightly

- The ***Accent Branch*** is usually the first branch and is the largest. It defines the angles of all the other major branches
- The branches are typically distributed right-back-left etc, from the trunk
- Back branches are essential to create depth of field
- The branches should be smaller as they ascend the trunk and closer together
- ***A bonsai is typically 6-8 times taller than the width of the trunk at the base***
- A single trunk bonsai has a ***visual line*** from the base of the trunk to some destination that determines the path that the viewer's eye will follow. It is very important for the artist to identify that visual line.
- Multiple crossing trunks and branches crossing the midline disrupt that visual line and are distracting
- Surface roots should radiate from the trunk circumferentially or away from the direction of a slanting style.
- Bends or twists in trunk or branches are referred to as ***"movement"***

- Movement should be consistent throughout the bonsai...if the trunk has many bends, the branches should have many bends as should the upper and lower branches.
- Branches should each originate from a different level on the trunk. Two branches from the same level are referred to as “bar branches” and are visually undesirable
- Branches arising from the inside of a curve are unsightly and unnatural.
- Branch length should vary in and out as the branches ascend to look more natural
- Twiginess is referred to as “ramification” and is a feature suggesting age in deciduous trees
- The distance between leaves is called the “***internode length***” and should be proportional to the size of the tree
- The compactness of the foliage, close to the visual center of a bonsai adds to the sense of “composition” unlike a landscape tree with “pom-pom” branches.