

How to Pick a Pot

The word “bonsai” means “tree in a container”. A bonsai is not a bonsai until it is in a suitable container. Selecting a pot is equivalent to selecting the frame for a painting. Like any other visual art, there is a large component of personal taste. The pot can make or break a superb bonsai composition.

A significant part of practicing Bonsai is the ability to spot the right pot. That may be difficult for a beginner. Here is some basic guidance.

Like other bonsai skills, knowledge of the horticultural needs of the species is also important to pot selection. For example, species with very fast-growing roots such as Trident Maples often require deeper pots and flowering and fruiting species such as Crab Apples require more root space and therefore deeper pots.

Gender The first thing you must do is to decide if your tree is masculine or feminine. Usually, a tree is a mix of both and question is which is dominant. This is crucial and perhaps the most important rule in choosing a pot. Some attributes that can help you along the way are that the curves, grace, smooth bark and sparse branches is considered feminine. The corresponding masculine traits are old coarse bark, deadwood, thick trunk and branches.

Size The general rule is: The pot should be approximately the same height as the trunk is wide above the nebari. Oval and rectangular pots are usually 2/3 of the tree’s height. Round or square pots should be 1/3 the height of the tree - unless foliage is unusually large, then the pot should be wider. This is compensated by lowering the height of the pot.

Design The pots design should match the degree of masculinity or femininity of your tree. The closer you get, the more harmonious the image of your bonsai. To accomplish this, a potter has several tools or attributes to work with. Should it be concave, convex, angular, round, oval, rectangular? Then to adjust the degree of feminine or masculine I can work with choice of texture, edge, feet and glaze.

Generally masculine pots are deep, angular, have clean lines and stout feet. A lip on the rim strengthens the masculinity; an inward edge reinforces the pot femininity. Feminine pots often have soft lines, delicate feet and are relatively low and sleek. Round pots, drum pots are generally considered to be androgynous. Another very general guideline: Conifers are best placed in unglazed pots and deciduous bonsai may be shown in either glazed or unglazed. This is not written in stone and some conifers are gorgeous in muted, earth tone glazes, for example. It is your decision!

The general rule when it comes to choosing the glaze for a pot is that the color should appear in the tree; either in the bark, the color of the leaves, and fruit or flowers. Therefore, the unglazed brown, gray and earth tones are usually safe choices. They also provide warmth and stability to the tree. But we can also work with contrasting colors like blue or cool green. They provide balance and freshness to the composition. Muted and flat glazes are more desirable.

The goal is to create harmony. Observe what choices others have made. Visit exhibitions; go to shows, look at books and magazines. Do not hesitate to contact a potter. They are used to drawing sketches and submitting proposals for a pot that would suit your tree. There is not one exclusive choice of a container for your tree. The best pot is a matter of your taste.

Where to buy Bonsai pots:

Here in California, the large bonsai shows, like the GSBF convention, the Redwood Empire Show (REBS), the Bay Area Bonsai Association (BABA) and the fundraisers for the three GSBF collections will offer large selections of both custom and imported pots for sale. Bring the dimensions and photos of the tree with you for your search. Some of the larger bonsai nurseries offer a broad selection of pots.

You can contact a potter and make a custom order. Custom made pots will be more expensive. Meeting the potter face-to-face, with the tree in hand (or photos) is a much more reliable way to get what you want. Be aware that glazes are not always predictable and the color you ultimately get may not be quite what you visualized.

If you are experienced and know what to look for, there are many auction sites and groups on the internet where pots change owners. An inexpensive used pot, on the other hand, may serve you well while the roots and branch structure are in development.

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, the first time, is not only satisfying but may save money.