

## How to Select Good Material for Bonsai

Trees for bonsai development may be acquired either by collecting plants from the wilderness (YAMADORI) or from nurseries. You can grow your own from seed or cuttings, but that will delay your start in creating your bonsai. Collecting and developing yamadori requires special skill and access to collecting areas. Beginners seldom have either of these.

Bonsai nurseries are relatively uncommon. Trees that have been grown specifically for bonsai require much more labor and are often grown at a slower pace intentionally. They are proportionately more expensive but may save you years of development time by coming with pre-established “movement” (trunk curves) and branch structure.

Most of us, as beginners, start our collections in our local garden nursery. This brief paper is intended to offer some guidelines to find nursery trees with the most potential to produce an attractive bonsai.

First piece of advice: spend a little more to obtain a tree with a larger trunk and more branches. Inexpensive (“one gallon”) junipers for \$7 will not provide you with much opportunity to practice wiring or pruning. It will take a decade to become an interesting tree. Buy a tree with at least a ¾ inch diameter trunk.

Second piece of advice: buy a tree that is commonly seen in your local landscapes. A tree must thrive in our climate zone to remain healthy enough to be pruned, shaped and survive in a container.

My advice to bonsai students, in our area, is to purchase one or more of the following species as their first tree:

- 1) Chinese elm (Fast growing throughout most of the year and tolerant of pruning and container growth.)
- 2) Trident maple (same good characteristics as elms and excellent root growth)

3) Japanese maple (a little more complicated than Trident and need more protection from the sun)

4) Junipers (procumbens nana and prostrata in particular)

5) Olives

6) Oaks

7) Liquid Amber

8) Hornbeams (need protection from direct sun)

If you have the money, buy one conifer (a tree with needles) and one deciduous tree (with leaves) from this list. That will give you more activities to practice throughout the year.

I would advise beginners to avoid Black Pines.

Sometimes a garden nursery will have a “Sale Table” or even a bone yard of trees that were misshapen or out-grew their pots. Don’t buy it just because it’s cheap!

Look for one of these 8 species in the nursery and then apply the following criteria:

YOU ARE LOOKING FOR A TAPERED TRUNK, SURFACE ROOTS GROWING CIRCUMFERENTIALLY FROM THE BASE OF THE TRUNK AND LOTS OF BRANCHES GROWING ALL AROUND THE TRUNK. You seldom find everything you are looking for! Focus on the trunk and surface roots, not the branches!

1) TRUNK. Remember that the most important features of a bonsai (and the most difficult to grow or change) are the nebari (surface roots) and the TRUNK! You can move and grow branches. There may be a single or multiple trunks. It should be at least 3/4 inch in diameter. It should be evenly tapered from the surface roots to the top of the tree. (“Reverse taper” is a bulge in the upper trunk and is unsightly and difficult to correct.) The trunk should NOT be “C shaped.”

2) ROOTS. This requires that you get your fingers dirty. Get down and scrape away the soil from around the entire circumference of the base of the trunk. Dig down till you find the first big roots. Good bonsai material should have roots radiating away from the trunk circumferentially. Roots which are one-sided or cross over one another can be corrected but it is difficult.

3) BRANCHES. There should be plenty of branches to choose from and distributed on all sides of the tree. The thickest branches should be at the bottom of the tree. Ideally, the branches should be closer together at the top of the tree. Remember that branches can be moved with wire or grafted or grown. They are less important in your buying decision than the trunk and surface roots.

4) FOLIAGE. Small leaves (like Chinese elm or Olive) are desirable. Smaller bonsai obviously require smaller leaves for scale. Look carefully at leaves and needles for signs of disease. They will give the best clues about the health of the tree. Shake juniper branches into your hand for spider mites. Pay attention to the color of needles in particular. Dusky grey-green foliage suggests mites. Don't buy a sick or weak tree unless you are prepared to accept a tragic end.

The best time of year to purchase bonsai material is in January and February. This will allow you to repot the tree into bonsai soil immediately. Never attempt to repot and style a tree at the same time. Let it recover from one or the other until you see new growth resume.

If you can, go the nursery with an experienced bonsai hobbyist! Experience is a great teacher!

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