

How to Select the Front of Your Bonsai

Trees are often attractive when viewed from various angles, **but bonsai are styled to present the one best image to the viewer.** That best viewing angle is identified as the *FRONT*.

Identifying the front of the tree is the first step in the design of the bonsai.

Selecting the front often involves compromise between the best views of different features of the tree.

When you decide to create your new bonsai, begin systematically:

- Remove the tree from its nursery pot and place it on a table or cut away the top edge of the plastic so that you have an unobstructed view of the base of the trunk
- Scrape away the soil at the root base to see the widest nebari (surface roots at the soil line.)
- Sit down and view the tree from eye level
- Slowly rotate the tree 360° then tilt the tree at various angles and again rotate it 360° as you study the nebari and trunk.
- Identify the view in which the nebari are the widest (or most interesting). The nebari give the bonsai the feeling of both age and stability.
- Identify the view in which the trunk has the most interesting movement (curves) and best taper. Which view shows the widest trunk? The trunk should demonstrate uniform taper from the base to the apex. “Reverse taper” means an area that is narrow, then wide. It is unsightly and unnatural. Avoid selecting a front in which the trunk curves outward toward the viewer, then back. This “pigeon breast” appearance is unattractive.

- Ideally the top of the tree should bend slightly toward the viewer as if bowing or welcoming.
- Rotating the tree while tilting at various angles may identify a new “potting angle” that you had not considered when the tree was straight up in the nursery pot. Use wood blocks to maintain that angle and plan the bonsai.
- Generally, you can ignore branches when selecting a front, unless the tree lacks branches in a large segment of the trunk. Branches may be moved, grown, or even grafted.
- Some trees may offer special features like shari or cavities which provide unique opportunities for viewer interest. You may need to consider those unique features in selecting the best view for the front.
- Be aware that the side directly opposite the best front for your bonsai is usually an equally attractive front. Thus the phrase, “every bonsai has two fronts.” Be sure to look at that opposite view.
- It is wise to mark the front of the new bonsai with a chop stick in the soil or a chalk mark on the container, because all the future styling is based upon that view.
- Take your time. Some bonsai artists study a tree for months before selecting the final front.

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