



China Trade Bonsai Society

Visit us on the web at: www.chinatradebonsaisociety.org

Monthly meetings: 1st Wednesday or each month, March-December, 6-8 pm at the Connecticut College Arboretum, New London Hall. Visitors welcome! For further info, contact Tom Lee (president) at <mailto:twcl@comcast.net>

September, 2006

Note: This month's meeting (September 6th) includes our annual 80/20 auction. PLEASE bring bonsai-related articles to auction off, you'll get cash!!!

CTBS would like to welcome new members Carol and Ann.
Welcome and thanks for joining our club!

Design Critique 101

Once again, Todd Hanson visited our club with an interesting and topical lecture. This month it was reviewing the elements of a design critique and some actual reviews of his and other member's trees. It was a truly collaborative evening, and while there were only eight of us there, we all got a chance to have our personal trees critiqued by fellow club members.

The evening began with Todd reviewing some basic elements of a design critique. Tools you will need include a good turntable (for turning the tree to see various points of view), wedges (to change the angle of the trunk/branches), sticks to mark the tree's front, a white cloth (to hide parts of the tree—this helps visualize what it will look like without certain features), and a camera. Todd believes the camera is one of the best design tools, because often trees look very different in two dimensions and weaknesses really stand out.



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Some of the advise Todd presented was quite interesting. First, he said to look for the smallest tree possible first. This means you need to ask yourself, “what is the smallest complete and satisfying bonsai I can make from this raw (pre-bonsai) material?” The three illustrations below might help visualize this concept.



Rough Stock



Smallest bonsai possible



Larger bonsai is also possible

A second piece of advice was to look for all of the positives about the material first. They should outweigh the negatives and should be able to “over accentuate” these negative features in the final design. This means you may need to break some established bonsai design rules. But, as Todd stated, it’s a good thing to learn the rules and then break them when your heart tells you to. (For a rant on this topic, read this month’s Yin Yang column.)



After this short lecture, we set about looking at some trees. Everyone pitched in and offered suggestions. It was fascinating to see how differently people see the potential of the same tree. I was left understanding that there are usually many options available when considering a potential design and there is plenty of room in this hobby for everyone to create unique designs from similar material. It is clear that you can easily develop a personal, signature style simply by the nature of your choices.

Thanks again to Todd Hanson for sparing his time, his wonderful trees, and his expertise to our club. He understands that a good bonsai is often a result of a collaboration of experience and ideas and it was fun to share this process with all the members of the club.





Rules Are For Wimps

Yes, they are. Just ask anyone these days. “Learn the rules so you can break them.” I have heard this more than any other phrase this year in bonsai. Why? Why is it a I can’t open an issue of Bonsai Europe, go to a club meeting, or read an article online and not hear this phrase?

I’ve always been good at this, this knowing the rules and how to use them to my advantage. Well, I guess I have been. Probably, I just follow things the way people expect me to and in my head I am the great rebel of rules. Either way, I still find myself troubled by this ‘break ‘em after you know them’ concept.

See, I have heard this so much this year that it has become the rule of thumb for bonsai styling. So now we have a new rule in American bonsai design: “know the rules so you can break them”.

This leads to a bit of a problem. If this is the latest rule in my design quiver, then I should break it and actually follow the rules. But then again, I ‘d be breaking the latest rule....you see my quandary.



Mt. Desert Island, ME

I wonder if what is really going on is that in an effort for American bonsai artists to establish a distinctive style, they have found it necessary to abandon the traditional eastern styling guidelines. By following the established rules, (you know, the ones that are a thousand years old!) a bonsai will turn out to look like, well, a bonsai. It will look like a Japanese or Chinese tree. This seems okay to me, because the trees coming out of the east kick some serious butt. They still command the highest prices in the American market and are still considered the highest form of the art. Most of us would love to have an import in our collection. Yet, it all seems somehow un-American. Americans have always marched away from tradition, away from ‘standard’ and toward the things new and fresh. Americans can always be counted on to reinvent their lives every once and a while and we sure as heck don’t like to be accused of copying anyone else.

In keeping with our “if we didn’t invent it we should re-invent it” attitude, we have pronounced war on “the rules”. We seem to see the rules as a challenge, that we should not honor them for fear we might seem unoriginal. And this seems to me to be at the core of this rule-breaking trend. In America, it is disgraceful to copy someone, even under the guise of learning. To copy is to prove yourself unoriginal, un-individual. Each of us must be individuals or suffer the risk of the entire social fabric of our country collapsing. (Well, okay, that does go a bit too far.)



Mt. Desert Island, ME

However, these rules are there to guide us, they establish outlines by which we can communicate and understand artistic principals and beauty (aesthetics). Admiration is the ultimate goal of bonsai. The issue is that we all admire different things and we each are unique in how we come to internalize our appreciation of beauty. Rules tend to standardize how we communicate with the design. They give us a set of standards by which we can begin to understand and appreciate the skill of a bonsai design.

Andy Rutledge, in his excellent online book, Artistic Foundations of Bonsai Design—Elements of Meaningful Composition (<http://www.andyrutledge.com/book/index.html>) states that: “*Stop thinking of bonsai design as rules-based and begin thinking of it as communication-based (the conventions of artistry are references for how to communicate, not what to communicate).*”

So, I would suggest that we do not throw away the rules or break them just for the sake of breaking them, but play with the rules, use them as a sort of canvas on which we can exercise a bit of personal freedom, a bit of American individuality. We can never be free of the framework rules give us in bonsai design, because without them we loose the ability to communicate our admiration through our trees, but we sure can break them to our advantage, thus adding to another's appreciation of our tree.

Next month, I'll continue this heavy-handed babble about rules and talk about some differences in Japanese, Chinese, European, and American bonsai aesthetics.

By the way, I've included a list of “The Rues” as collected by Brent Walston

Bonsai Design Rules:

Trunk and Nebari

1. Height should be six times the caliper of the trunk.
2. Trunk should lean slightly toward the viewer.
3. Trunk should flare at base to visually anchor the plant.
4. Roots should radiate from the flare.
5. No eye-poking roots (directly at viewer).
6. Apex should lean toward viewer.
7. Trunk should taper as it ascends. No reverse taper.
8. Grafts should match understock and scion so that they are unobtrusive, or be placed low enough to disappear into the nebari.
9. Curves in trunk should not result in 'pigeon breast' (roundness toward viewer).
10. Apex should finish in the direction set by the base. 'Flow' should be maintained.
11. For formal and informal upright, the apex should be over the base.
12. In informal uprights, too many 'S' curves will be tiresome.
13. As a tree ascends the curves should be closer together (related to branch placement).
14. A tree should have only one apex.
15. Twin tree trunks should divide at the base, not higher up.

Branches:

1. No crossing branches, or branches that cross the trunk.
2. No eye-poking branches (pointed directly at viewer).
3. First branch should be placed approximately one third the height of the tree.

4. Succeeding branches placed at one third the remaining distance to the top of the tree.
5. Branches go on the outside of the curves (No belly branches).
6. Branch caliper should be in proportion to the trunk. Branches that are thicker than one third the trunk caliper will be too thick.
7. First branch should be left (or right), second branch right (or left), third branch should be back branch.
8. Branches should visually alternate, no parallel branches.
9. Branches should diminish in size and caliper as they ascend.
10. There should be space between the branches to 'Let the birds fly through'.
11. First and second branches (Left and Right branches) should be placed forward of the mid line to 'invite' the viewer.
12. First, second, and third branches are approximate 120 degrees apart, with the back branch not directly behind the tree.
13. Only one branch per trunk position, no 'wheel and spoke' or whorled branches, or bar branches (branches directly opposite each other).
14. Branches should create an outline of a scalene triangle with the apex representing God, the middle corner man and the lower corner earth.
15. Secondary branches should alternate left and right and follow the rules of main branch placement, except there should be no secondary branches moving up or down. This creates the foliage pad.
16. To create the illusion of an old tree, wire the branches down. Young trees have ascending branches. The branches near and in the apex can be horizontal or ascend since this is the young part of the tree.
17. Branches for cascades generally follow the rules for uprights, except that the trunk moves down.
18. In twin trees, there should not be branches between the trees which would cross the trunks. The outside branches of both trees creates the triangle of foliage.
19. A jin should not be hidden in foliage.

Pots:

1. The tree should be placed behind the mid line of the pot, and to the left or right of the center line.
2. The depth of the pot should be the caliper of the trunk, except for cascades.
3. Colored glazed pots should be used for flowering and fruiting trees and the colors should complement the flower color.
4. The width of the pot should two thirds the height of the tree. For very short trees, the width should be two thirds the spread of the tree.
5. Style of the pot should match the tree. Uprights without much movement should be in rectangular pots, informal uprights with a lot of trunk movement should be in oval or round pots. Massive trees should be in deep rectangular pots.

From The President

China Trade Bonsai Society
Newsletter Items for September, 2006

Items:

September's meeting will include:

1. Tom Lee will start the discussion of Lingnan Penjing Techniques. This is a pruning tips lecture and members are encouraged to bring in bonsai for discussion and/or actual pruning suggestions. Please also bring your tools if you wish to do some actual restyling.
2. We will also have our annual Members' Auction. The club's 80/20 rule will apply. The members that bring in items for auction will get 80% and the club gets 20% of the value of the winning bid. This is a great opportunity to lighten your load of bonsai related items while helping out yourself and our club financially. And who knows, you might just end up with that item you always wanted at the auction.

Also:

3. Todd Hansen recently wrote an article for CT Gardener magazine. A very nice grass roots gardening publication focused on zones 5 and 6. The article was titled "Bonsai for Beginners" and really encouraged everyone interested to join a club. Club contacts were listed for all our clubs. To see more about the publication go to www.ctgardener.com. Unfortunately, you cannot access the article from the site but you can submit a request for a sample issue.

Tom Lee

Dues Reminder

Just a friendly reminder to renew your membership if you have not already. Dues are just \$25 per year and enable us to continue bringing in special programs and guests.

Bring your dues to our regular Wednesday meetings, pay online using the website's PayPal account, or mail them to:

Alice Kuo
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