

Bonsai Judging Criteria

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Without a true judging standard, it seems people are often confused and discouraged by having trees judged and receiving constructive or not so constructive suggestions. With each artist having his or her own style, teachings and philosophies, it is safe to say just about every judge looks for different things and evaluates trees in a different way. Though I have no idea what other judges are looking for, I do have at least some idea of what I am. I thought I would share this with your group so people know what to expect if they are putting trees in the exhibition.

To me a display tells a story about a particular tree, its species and where it comes from.....it is a snapshot of a moment in time in that tree's life. Tell me a story.

Style: Natural vs Traditional vs Whatever. This maybe one of the biggest differences between judges and most likely based on who they studied with. Some artists think the "traditional or Neo-classical" style is the only way, while others would more likely prefer the more "naturalist, or American style" bonsai. Truth is I do not care what style you choose, I care how you represent it. I studied in Japan, and at the National Collection in Washington DC...both of which were in a very traditional style of bonsai design and pots. I have also spent time studying with American bonsai professionals who use a more natural style including Larry Jackle and Arthur Joura, 2 pioneers in natural style bonsai and using American collected species and American potters. When I first took over the collection at C.B.G. it was strictly a traditional bonsai collection. Seven years later it is easy to see the American influence including species, style and potters. We also have penjing in development. I like many styles of "bonsai" and feel comfortable recognizing and evaluating them on their merit. **It is not my job to tell you how to style your tree or what kind of display to set up. It is my job to judge the display on the merits of what you present, and the execution in which you create it. You are telling the story not me.** Intention and purpose is important not the style.

Health: Tree health is always important in a display. Foliage color, leaf formation, pests are all considered in evaluation. You will never have a great bonsai if it is not healthy.

Wire: Of course, we would not see wire in a tree in nature but in bonsai it is sometime a necessity. Try to limit wiring to the secondary and tertiary branches when possible. Guy wires might be a better alternative to wiring primary branches. Regardless of how much wire you use, applying it properly and in a fashion that looks clean is important.

Development: How refined is the tree? Of course the more refined a tree is the “better” it seems. Scale and in proportion might even be more important. A more refined, smaller leafed tree with the right amount of negative space is a great way to bring a tree to life in a display. You can still have a nice display with a less refined tree; however, the level of refinement and scale will impact how it’s put together.

Container: The relationship between a tree and the container is an important one. The right pot can really elevate the status of a tree and contribute greatly to the story being told by the artist. Size, shape, color, glaze, potter all come into play when making the perfect pairing of the two. Picking up subtle hints of color and texture really tie the two together. A container can also be an opportunity to create some contrast, like with a pink flower and a blue container. Whether a container has a complimentary feel or more contrasting qualities it should not distract from the tree but help elevate the display, and be a part of the story. If you have an American tree that’s styled in a naturalistic style, perhaps a traditional Japanese pot might not be the best fit. Using an American potter or stone, or even wood might be more appropriate.

Accent plants: What does it bring to the display?

Accent plants can contribute greatly to a display and show a **regional connection** to the tree. If you are displaying a battered mountain collected tree with a lush tropical plant, that does not contribute to the story and perhaps a small succulent or stone would be a better choice.

Accents can show **seasonal interest** as well. If you have a fall display try pairing with something that is seasonally appropriate and has seedpods or fruit or browning foliage. These will all help tell the story. A lush green plant at that time would not have the same affect.

Orientation or direction of an accent is important. Accents and pots typically face back into a tree, or have some part of the plant directing back to the tree. This helps bring your eye back into the display. However, if you have a wind influenced or windswept tree maybe something more balanced or with a slight direction away would tell a better story even through it directs your eye off the display. If that is the case, the rest of the display must follow suit. Intention is important. A stone or figurine might also be better in that case as they can lean back into the tree against the wind and still look natural.

Stands: Stands are somewhat like the containers in that they elevate and add another piece to the story as well as having a function. Viewing angle is important in display, especially in smaller trees. Try to elevate your tree to a good viewing height. Having a stand that fits the overall feel of the tree and pot is beneficial. Having a ponderosa pine in an American potter pot on a traditional stand would not tell a cohesive story. A more rustic stand or wood slab might be better in that case and tie into the natural feel. Like the container this is another opportunity to add some personal touch and expand the story beyond the tree, however make sure not to overshadow the tree.

Scroll: I am certainly not a scroll expert, but like most things in a display it should help tell the story with regional or seasonal interest.

Tie down wires: There are many ways to conceal and anchor bonsai tie downs so they do not show in a display. Sometimes this means you need to use some more advanced techniques during repotting especially on collected material. This is just another way to show your skill and present a clean looking tree.

Feeling of the overall display: What is the feel of the display, is there tension or balance? Harmony or chaos? Is it night or day (sometimes a scroll helps with that), what season is it?

Intention: No matter what type of tree, pot, stand, accent and display you choose put it together with an intention. Do things with the purpose of telling that trees story how you see fit. Be sure to have attention to the details, it is often the smallest things in a display that set it apart from the others.

Final thoughts:

Intention

Cohesiveness

Purpose

Story

Attention to detail

Tell a great story using the pieces that make a display. Be creative, don't be afraid to express yourself using the tree to tell the story..... **Lastly, and most importantly, the secret to success in any display or anytime you create bonsai either for yourself or for public viewing.... it is the most important thing to remember.....**

Have fun doing it!

I hope this helps a little, I look forward to seeing the exhibition and being part of your show!!
Chris