

Choosing Garden Stock for Bonsai

By Bob

The fall is a great time of year to visit nurseries and look for that perfect shrub to become your next bonsai masterpiece. Prices are usually at their lowest and there is still a fairly good selection.

But, how do we pick a "perfect" shrub? What do we look for that gives it the potential to be a good bonsai? First let me say that looking through the nursery's "reject" pile may be advantageous, but be sure to check for the tree's health. It's no use working on a dead or dying tree. Don't be afraid to pick up the pot and examine the shrub up close and from all angles. The following are a few things to keep in mind while looking for your first tree.

Species:

Junipers are the most abundant and the easiest to work with. Some (e.g. procumbens nana) can be kept indoors in the winter, but most should be left outdoors with some protection. Other possibilities are Japanese Maple, Amur Maple, Larch, Spruce, Mugo Pine, etc., but these should probably be left for your third or fourth tree.

Trunk:

There should be a single trunk. It should have some curves starting from the ground and going all the way to the top. There should be no straight sections unless they are high enough up to be cut off when forming the new apex. Alternatively the entire trunk should be straight to produce a formal upright or slanted style. This is usually the case with Blaauwi Junipers. I believe that any trunk with a diameter at the base less than the diameter of your little finger is too small (not everyone would agree with this). Remember you will be cutting off a substantial portion of the top to reduce the overall height.

Branches:

The more branches the better. Unless you plan to design a windswept tree, look for branches radiating out in all directions. They should be smaller in diameter as you go up the trunk. Any thick ones near the top can be removed, but that may leave a scar.

Foliage:

Look for healthy, live foliage all along the branch. This is not always possible on the lower branches, but remember that some of them may be removed in your design.

Roots:

Dig your finger into the soil at the base of the trunk and feel for future surface roots. Like branches they should radiate out in all directions. Unlike branches it is better if they are all at the same level.

Overall Shape:

For your first few trees an informal upright tree is best. Try to imagine the shrub after pruning as a bonsai. It will have a front, a new apex, some back branches and an overall triangular shape.

As in many of life's more rewarding pursuits it will be necessary to compromise on some of these points. I have listed them in order of importance but don't dismiss a possible tree because it doesn't satisfy all of the suggestions above.

So, get out to your local nursery, examine a few shrubs/trees and find that "perfect"