Bonsai Pot - Selection Guidelines (not rules)

*"If ten people were asked to choose a pot for a particular bonsai it is quite possible that each would return with ten different containers - and, each would probably be quite suitable. … only guidelines … . The Art of bonsai is not just the styling of the tree, it is the composite picture of a tree in a pot. Neither element should greatly overpower the other, however, if one errs, it is better to err on the side of the more subtle pot."* … Deborah Koreshoff

"Art itself as a very encompassing attribute of every human culture. But first, let me correct your nomenclature. Traditional styling in the US is imitative art... a copying of what the Japanese seem to do. Follow the rules; which are not rules at all but aesthetic parameters that work. … In all I do bonsai-wise, I follow the generalized sense of the rules. They work." … Nick Lenz

*"An effective container is to bonsai as an effective frame is to a painting. The best choice should complete the composition and balance all of its elements. Naturally, the horticultural needs of a tree always come first. That being said, if selected wisely and objectively, the pot can be used to help manipulate the elements and better communicate the artist’s personal vision."* … Walter Paul

The same opinion from Walter Paul and Nick Lenz

* "Artist’s Personal Vision" - There are no rules that if not obeyed are punishable - it's just guidance.

But perhaps MOST important is the statement from Walter Paul …

**The horticultural needs of a tree always come first**

# Pot Selection

* **FIRST AND FOREMOST, PICK A POT APPROPRIATE FOR THE HORTICULTURAL NEED OF THE TREE** - e.g. root growth tendencies
* **Avoid**
  + Misshapen -Rocks on Flat Surfaces
  + Chipped or Cracked Pots - only for growing, not showing. Cracked pots will not have the same sound when hit with knuckle around the entire pot.
  + Insufficient or Undersized drain holes - moisture retention may cause root rot
  + Drain holes NOT at low points of pot - if not failure to drain may cause root rot
  + Cheap vs. Inexpensive - Long hot fired pots will have a “ring” rather than a thud or clunk when struck. Another test is wetting your finger and then rubbing it in the inside of the pot. If the clay readily absorbs the moisture, it may be low fired. Glazed pots that are low-fired pots can crack, and spall [splinter or chip], with the glaze coming off in flakes.

Choosing a pot that really suits the tree is a challenge, as different variables (like shape, choosing between glazed/unglazed and color) need to be taken into account. A few basic guidelines can be used to select the right pot. These should not be taken as strict rules; aesthetic considerations tend to be Highly Personal / Subjective. Additionally, various aspects - root growth, deciduous material, shohin, … - may dictate deeper/larger pots than guidance suggests.

* **SIZE and SHAPE** - ONLY GUIDANCE and you should take other issues into account.
  + **Length** of pot 2/3 height of tree or width of tree for short/wide tree but *…* Literati may be in round pots with a diameter of only 1/3 of the height of the tree, and sometimes very shallow, the soil being mounded up quite high. This is to emphasize the height and elegance of the trunk line
  + **Depth** of pot match trunk size - *except*
    - Match the pot to the species
      * e.g. Willows and Crape Myrtles use up moisture at a great rate and therefore need a deeper pot
      * e.g. Wisteria and Camellias prefer a deeper pot to produce good flowers.
    - Cascade or multi-trunk
    - Collected tree with tap root.
    - Some deciduous material may require deeper or wider pots, especially if unglazed.
    - Young trees or those with very thin trunks can also be an exception to the rule.
  + **Width** narrower than spread of longest branches except the "length of the pot can be extremely exaggerated to emphasize a meadow or an open field." Naka I p. 85.
  + **Straight trunk** style best in rectangular pot
  + **‘feminine’ trees** - curved/soft lined trunk and more gently shaped use oval, round, round cornered (Fig 207 - BT-I)
  + **‘Masculine’ Trees** - Powerful / rugged tree - use angular pots
  + Inward curving shapes or an edge on the inside of the upper rim
    - Only be used with trees that will NEVER freeze. If the root ball freezes, it can catch under these rims and crack your pots.
    - Makes it difficult to remove tree from the pot. Never be used as a grow pot for a tree moved to "show" pot.

**How to choose the front on a round, square, hexagon or other equilateral pot** (NAKA Tech I page 86 - 87)

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |

# VARIOUS COLOR / GLAZE - UNGLAZED RECOMMENDATIONS

* **CONIFERS and PINE TREES -** Guideline is Use unglazed pots

|  |
| --- |
| Ezo Spruce on Rock / Picea 5 years in training (app. 10yrs old, original design by Warren Hill) Chinese Blue glazed pot, bronze bird on a Dan Barton accent slab Is the pot a distraction? A quick image search of Ezo Spruce revealed no additional glazed presentation pots. |
| Walter Paul Ezo Spruce |

**Deciduous Trees** - A glazed pot is most often recommended for but it is "always permissible" (Naka) to use unglazed.



Do not use a bright glaze unless the tree has flowers or fruits. Use a pastel color for spring flowers and a darker color for one that has beautiful foliage in the autumn.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| http://www.johnpittbonsaiceramics.co.uk/images/PotGuide/colourwheel.jpg | | This color circle shows the primary colors - yellow, blue and red, secondary colors are listed to smoothly blend from one to the next.  **Harmony** is achieved by selecting color pairs lying on opposite sides of the circle, complementary colors, with intensity reduced to the color saturation of the tree.  When looking for suitable combinations of complementary colors, you don‘t have to follow the chart rigidly. |
| If a contrast is too distracting, try the color next to it. Potter John Pitt, custom-made a blue pot for a pink Azalea - not green from the color wheel. | | |
|  | bluepotredtree.jpg (550×733) | | |

Mineral Deposits

## Prevention

Oiling pots is said to help keep mineral deposits at a minimum. Although it seems logical, I have not investigated this - two identical pots with identical trees, each watered, fertilized the same, in the same physical location - one oiled and one not.

Unless you use collected rain to water bonsai, local tap water is "sweet" - I have tested at anywhere from 7.4 - 8.3. What about limiting mineral deposits by adding vinegar to water for bonsai - much more labor intensive but it might be beneficial - a friend in Massachusetts routinely added teaspoon of vinegar to each gallon of her bonsai water.

<http://www.bonsai4me.com/AdvTech/ATHard%20Water%20pH%20and%20Bonsai.html>

"Watering your bonsai with collected rainwater (which will tend to be very slightly acidic) is an excellent idea and obviously reduces the risk of lime building up in the soil. However, during dry periods particularly during the summer or when maintaining a large collection of bonsai, watering with rainwater is unfortunately not a practical solution.

In real terms, the regular, fortnightly application of something to reverse the alkalinity of the lime in your bonsai soil is enough to keep your trees healthy. Fortnightly I use a liquid fertiliser (sic - author perhaps British, who don't seem to know how to spell) marketed specifically for use with ericaceous or lime-hating plants during the growing season and this is more than sufficient to counteract the effect of hard water on lime-hating species such as Azalea.

For the rest of my bonsai that prefer a neutral to acidic soil, irrespective of the bonsai soil-mix, I use an ericaceous fertiliser OR a mixture of ONE teaspoon of vinegar (the type of which seems irrelevant) with 7 litres (1.85 gal) of water once a month. Again, this is sufficient to counteract the effects of lime in hard water areas."

## Cure

I tried soaking pots with calcium deposits for an hour with Oxiclean and then experimented with scrubbing with various agents: Vinegar, CLR, Lime-Away, and Ammonia. I also tried a mix of Vinegar and Baking Soda, Rubbing Alcohol & uncooked rice, and a paste of vinegar & salt. None of these treatments totally removed deposits.

Not tried - rub with potato skin and tile cleaner.

<http://misseto.angelfire.com/winter2.pdf>

*"Winter is an excellent time to pull those pots out of storage and properly clean them so they will be ready for the rush of spring. Your pots will last longer and any Bonsai next planted in them will look better if they have been prepared. Bonsai pots usually collect an ugly ring of calcium deposit around the edge which can build up and appear very ugly. After brushing thoroughly with a whisk or scrub brush and rinsing out their dirt residue, soak overnight in a laundry tub or bucket those pots with a calcium deposit with water and an addition of “CLR”, then rinse them well. It is also recommended to soak them again for 24 hours in a solution of 1 part bleach to 9 parts of water. Too much bleach can damage them, so don’t overdo it. Scrub them out well and then soak them again in fresh water for a few hours to get rid of any bleach traces."*

I have NOT tried the Bleach soak, but CLR (even full strength) did not remove mineral stains from my pots.

<http://bonsaificusretusa.com/how-to-clean-and-maintain-bonsai-pots/>

*"Make a mixture of 1 part vinegar to 4 parts water and completely submerge the empty pot in this for an hour or so. When removed from the solution, gently wire-brush the pot to remove the stubborn mineral deposits.*

*The other chemical method is to use 1 part bleach in 6 parts water and soak the pot for 24 hours. Following this, the pot should be soaked in water for an hour to make sure the bleach has been completely removed. This last method has the secondary benefit of sterilizing the pot. After soaking for 24 hours in bleach, few (if any) disease organisms will still be alive. In the gardening world, this is a standard method of eliminating the spread of disease from plant to plant. Not only are the pots soaked, but the tools are also. However, bleach has a tendency to rust tools if not properly cared–for after the soak, so it is not recommended for expensive bonsai tools."*

<http://www.bonsai4me.com/AdvTech/ATHard%20Water%20pH%20and%20Bonsai%20page2.html>

*"Cleaning Lime-Scale from Bonsai Pots*

*Bonsai pots will frequently display a serious build-up of lime-scale in hard-water areas and the method for its removal is straightforward; use 100% vinegar and a soft-brush to break down and remove the deposits of lime, quickly and efficiently. Vinegar will not cause any damage to the pot or its glaze."*

Neither Vinegar and Water nor full strength Vinegar removed mineral stains from my pots.

<http://www.phoenixbonsai.com/Notes/Preparing%20Your%20Bonsai%20Trees%20for%20Display.pdf>

*"The most efficient way I have found to clean mineral deposit from pots is with muriatic acid, a brush and a lot of patience. This swimming pool acid can be caustic and dangerous to humans, as anyone who has ever splashed it on their skin, or breathed in vapors can attest! Wear gloves, eye protection and a face mask to prevent trouble. Pour out a little acid in a container, and work from that container with a brush rather than soaking a pot in the acid. On glazed pots, it is best to use a rag to apply the acid, and try the acid on an inconspicuous area first to make sure there is no damage to the glaze. Once you have gotten off as much of the mineral deposit as you can, wash the pot. Rinse the acid off the pot with water, followed by cleaning the pot in a tub with Lysol and water, and then rinse, rinse, rinse. Let it dry."*

I HAVE NOT tried Muriatic Acid. None of my pots is truly valuable (none cost over $100) but several are handmade and therefore I could not replace them. With all the warnings, I am reluctant to try this one. Has anyone tried it?

# REPAIR

<http://peterteabonsai.wordpress.com/2011/10/22/what-a-crack-pot/>

*"There are several ways to find out if a pot is cracked. The first thing I always do is hold the pot with one hand and tap it on several points with the knuckle of my other hand. The sound that you get should be a somewhat high pitch resonating sound. The harder the clay, the higher the pitch of the resonating sound. If the sound is a dud sound with no resonance, then there is a crack somewhere. The second thing I do is a thorough visual inspection of the pot. With a good visual inspection, you can find small chips or even repairs to the pot that the sound check will not detect. Once a cracked pot is repaired, the pot will produce a resonating sound when tapped.*

*The Japanese equivalent of crazy glue is what I’m going to use to fix this crack. Be sure to buy the liquid version and not the gel version. The liquid will wick into the crack and give you a better bond.*

*After long term exposure to moisture, the glue will start to deteriorate and the pot can potentially continue to crack again."*

THIS IS A VERY COMPLETE DISCUSSION WITH VISUALS.

<http://misseto.angelfire.com/winter2.pdf>

If any are cracked and are salvageable, now is a good time to repair them. I like to use “Gorilla Glue”.

After observing Hitoshi Kanegae, one-time owner of New England Bonsai Gardens in Bellingham, MA (one of the few facilities in the United States that is approved by the USDA to import bonsai from Asia), I have personally repaired with wood glue / Gorilla Glue thinned with water and then used a cracked (not broken) pot.

# LINKS

## Pot Selection

<http://www.phoenixbonsai.com/Notes/Preparing%20Your%20Bonsai%20Trees%20for%20Display.pdf>

<http://www.bonsai4me.com/AdvTech/ATChoosing%20the%20Right%20Pot%20for%20your%20Bonsai.htm>

<http://walter-pall-bonsai.blogspot.com/2010/10/pot-selection-integrating-artistic.html>

<http://www.bonsai-southern-tasmania.org.au/resources/Pots.pdf>

## Pots

<http://www.gobbs.org/chops.htm> - Brandywine Bonsai Guide to Potters

<http://www.redwing.net/~daalms/index.html> Sara Rayner

<http://taikoearth.com/> - Rob Addonizio

<http://www.clamalleypots.com/> - Paul Olson

<http://www.rockportpottery.net/> - Ralph Richardson

<http://www.tokoname.or.jp/bonsai/> Tokoname

## Potter Identifying marks

<http://www.tokoname.or.jp/bonsai/maker-e.htm> - Tokoname Bonsai Pot Makers / chops

<http://japanesebonsaipots.net/chop-and-signature-resource/> Signature and chop database (Antique Japanese / Chinese)

<http://www.phoenixbonsai.com/BigPicture/Pots.html> About Bonsai Pots and Potters