

# Judging Bonsai The Criteria

By Kath and Malcolm Hughes, UK

Photos by Malcolm Hughes

## Part Three.

Part One was published in Q2, 2014 and Part Two was published in Q3, 2014;

**O**ur challenge now is to try and produce guidelines that will be accepted and used by most (I would not dare to suggest all). If we can provide a universal set of criteria/guidelines and the means of using them at ground level i.e. at Clubs and local Shows, and if it is seen to *work* and be treated with respect, then hopefully we can move on to getting the method accepted at National or International level.

These images show trees exhibited at European exhibitions; some attained awards, some did not. The comments accompanying each tree reflect strengths and weaknesses of each indicating how the decision-making process came about.



**Larix decidua:** Height (max) - 61 cms.

This larch group was considered to have potential in the long term. However, there is no primary tree and no obvious apex—there is too great a uniformity in terms of height. Also no dominant tree; a small sapling has been planted at the front of the group rather than toward the back giving no clear impression of depth.

The surface dressing was poor, with a covering of fine dead foliage together with patchy clumps of moss. Pot is OK, Health good, no sign of disease, has potential, needs time and refinement.

When we are judging bonsai, we first must scrutinise all the trees; we then can make a choice as to which ones will receive an award. It can seemingly be so easy to shortlist a number that stand out above the remainder. Or should I say we can disregard some as not being up to the standard required for awards. If you cannot select to this point, then you should not have been asked to judge at a show. If however you envisage this as a training exercise then what do you look for?

Weeds, dirty pots, unsuitable pots, shaggy and overgrown foliage, dead and damaged leaves, discolored and dead needles, *jin* and *shari* that have gone green, pests or pest damage, bad and crossing wiring, poor shape, lack of *nebari*, general ill health and bad color, inverted taper, poor branch positioning (including T branches), heavy branches at the top, lack of apex or too many apexes; there are so many factors by which you can reject trees and this is what you must do before stating to select the good or even excellent.

Having rejected all trees totally unsuitable for showing, and let's hope that are not too many in this category, you can move on to the positive judging for the best. In some instances, the decision can be a relatively straightforward exercise, however at the end of the day, a decision must be reached, a decision where certain trees attain the status of being among the most impressive of all those on display. Their owners can be justifiably proud; conversely, those whose trees did not qualify for judgement beyond initial rejection may be left disappointed yet asking the question, what's wrong with my tree?

This can be difficult to accept, these owners have put so much effort into getting their trees to what they considered a high standard, worthy of their bonsai being exhibited. Perhaps a little basic training by the club is required for members before they even consider exhibiting, even at beginner level. Have you ever questioned why many beginners consider entering starter

trees or novice trees without performing basic cleaning and tidying tasks? Would you go to a party in your gardening clothes?

Now this brings us to trees we are truly judging to win Awards or to be best in their Class. The main question is, on what basis do judges of bonsai justify their decisions as to what constitutes certain trees being viewed as *the best* out of all those displayed on any particular occasion?

Bonsai judges have to be able to justify their decision, and not just for bonsai, but in any competitive scenario. An exhibitor is fully justified in asking the judge why their tree failed to get an award. Hence, the need to explain on what basis and by what criteria decisions are made.

When viewing bonsai, the aim in judging is to narrow down the criteria on which a judgement is formulated. Essentially we are taking into consideration the following features:

**Suitability of species for bonsai.** People make some very strange choices—large palmate, e.g. horse chestnut, and large pinnate, e.g. mountain ash—are all equally unsuitable for their refusal to reduce in leaf size.

**General health and wellbeing of the tree.**

**Trunk;** was the front of the tree chosen showing the trunk to its best? Bark; does it show maturity and plating? Is it clean and free from algae?

**Branch positioning,** including ramification.

- Are the primary and largest branch and the counterbalance branch well defined?
- Are the main branches correctly placed without interfering or covering each other? Was it correctly pruned leaving no stumps? Are pruning cuts well finished?
- Is there enough negative space between the branches?
- Does the form of the branches logically coincide with the style and the trunk movement?
- Is the apex well defined?

**Surface roots or Nebari;** (if appropriate to the species) one of the most important factors to observe for styling a good tree, and also the one that is difficult to correct. It plays a crucial role in defining the front of the tree.

**Foliage;** leaf color and size; there should be no obvious blemishes or evidence of wind burn.

**Deadwood effects,** if any, should be well defined (*jin*, *shari* and *uro*), without excessive carving marks or evidence of revolving tools. Should show natural aspect of the work.

**Wiring;** correct wiring, not excessive but strong enough to hold branches in place without damaging the bark of the tree. Where possible, wiring should be discrete.

**Surface dressing;** use of moss and appropriateness of surface material, lack of weeds.

**Absence of pests or diseases.**



**Acer palmatum:** Height - 55 cms.

An impressive tree which highlights good autumn color. Not really obvious from the photo, but branch development and positioning is good as well as the form of the trunk. The faults were two branches, both forward growing and consequently prevented a clear view of the trunk line.

The pot was suitable if slightly small in relation to the tree. Also the stand was too dominant in terms of height and length. The surface had a good natural moss covering. A good tree but with fundamental branch structure faults, it will never be a true winner.



**Juniperus chinensis:** Height - 44 cms.

Still in the early stages of development. This tree needs much more work to have it ready for exhibiting. The basic style is there but it has clear faults lacks refinement. The apex requires considerable thought as strange, unnaturally shaped branches mar its basic structure. It needs a lot more growth and development. The branches on the left had side lack form and are too heavy in terms of balance. In contrast, the pot and surface dressing is very good.

It is clearly a well cared for tree but the owner must recognise its inherent faults.



***Pinus sylvestris***: Height - 31 cms.

As a basic concept, this Scots pine, could in time become an exceptional bonsai, but at present it needs to develop greater foliage in relation to trunk and branch structure. The pot, stand and trunk blend together in a dramatic fashion. It is let down is by the lack of foliage. The foliage part of the tree could afford to be lifted to reveal the branch formation, there is a need for more needle development. Once that is ultimately achieved, we will have a dramatic tree but perhaps not a truly great tree.



***Juniperus sabina***: Height - 90 cms.

An award-winning tree which beautifully reflects the semi-cascade style. Effective use of deadwood; branch positioning and refinement excellent. Good balance of tree, pot and stand.

The effect is accentuated by the use of a sickle pot as well as the use of a mix of ground cover. Foliage mass is neat and well styled. Already an award winning tree, that will develop into a memorable tree with just a little more foliage.

**Pot**; to include the appropriateness of the pot (shape, color, texture) and the position of the tree in the pot.

**Stand where used**; appropriateness of size, color and design.

**Aesthetics, general impression**; is it presented at the correct angle thus showing that the balance of the tree is correct? Are the respective volumes of foliage and branches, compared to each other, in harmony and are these volumes in proportion to the tree? Is the tree styled in such a way that it gives a strong impression of depth? Styling a tree can create an artificial appearance. Is the work on the tree done in such a way that it still gives the impression that the artist merely interfered in the natural appearance of the tree.

Often, on being invited to judge bonsai at a society show or exhibition, you are presented with the society's own set of judging criteria, including a points system for scoring each set of criteria. These can prove highly detailed and comprehensive, to the extent that an enormous amount of time can be spent 'ticking all the boxes'. While the purpose behind such judging may be well intentioned, it can prove a very time-consuming exercise if faced with judging a large number of trees. On occasion I have been confronted with the task of judging over 150 bonsai at National and International level. Time is a luxury one does not have on these occasions. Lists like the one on the facing page are perhaps put to better use as teaching aids for those hoping to become bonsai judges. Then they are able to look at *all* possible variables necessary in assessing a *good* bonsai from one which stands out as being *exceptional*.

In reality, developing an eye for evaluating a bonsai stems largely from experience. This is based upon a clear awareness of which features of each individual tree stand out and make the greatest impression.

I have created a list of the most significant criteria a judge should consider when examining a bonsai exhibition. The list encompasses a range of features, not all of which would apply to every tree. This list was designed initially as a score sheet, marks having been allocated for each of the points listed. For the purposes of this article, the idea is to draw upon this list as a learning tool rather than as a score sheet. Hence, the marks allocated for each feature within each section have been removed. This list, which includes items not originally listed such as *jin* and *shari*, and also includes the use stands on which it is exhibited, covers features on which judges must reflect in making their decision.

Judging, be it a floral display, paintings, dog or cats, or in this case bonsai, is not just a matter of arriving at a numeric score; it is rather a case of distinguishing between a number of bonsai that are all good and arriving at a conclusion based on which is First, Second and Third, and maybe, which ones we consider to be of such a standard that would warrant, an Award of Merit.

TRUNK	
Shape:	Shape according to style
Bark:	Well developed or not
Marks:	Wire and other marks / unsightly cuts
Tapering:	Lack of inverted taper as well correct tapering
Shari:	Appearance appropriate to the tree
BRANCHES	
Distribution:	Groupings
Development:	Positioning of branches
Bark:	Condition of main branches
Ramification:	Extent of fine branch development
Marks:	Avoidance of wire marks
Jins:	As appropriate to the tree, give aged appearance
FOLIAGE	
Leaves:	Horticultural perfection
Blemishes:	Evidence of disease, windburn etc.
Size:	In proportion to the tree
Distribution:	Not hanging below branch unless weeping variety
SOIL / SURFACE DRESSING	
Well finished:	Clear of weeds:
Surface:	Appropriate surface cover e.g. moss
ROOTS/NEBARI	
Visibility:	Well or badly distributed as surface roots (nebari)
Buttressed:	Shape of buttress at soil level
Other cover:	As appropriate to the tree(s)
Rock planting:	Roots give natural impression of having grown naturally (clashed) to the rock.
POT	
Shape & Style:	Appropriate to the nature of the tree (species and style)
Placement:	Tree correctly positioned within pot
Appearance:	Cleanliness
Size:	Good proportion to the tree(s), not over- or under-potted
Color	Appropriate to species
STANDS	
Shape & Style:	Appropriateness to tree/pot combination.
AESTHETIC QUALITY	
Could be a subjective judgement but reflecting overall impression of the tree(s) within the pot or displayed on a tray. Overall sense of balance and harmony.	

Recognizing the elements that make a bonsai—from the tree (species and style) to the pot and the manner it is displayed—all contribute to our judging processes. Through experience of having worked in creating bonsai, we learn by trial and error what ultimately constitutes a tree that reflects a *good* bonsai, a tree of which you feel justifiably comfortable in displaying.



**Juniperus chinensis 'Itoigawa':** Height - 44cms.

In this instance, the question is whether the tree is back-to-front. Sadly, a superb trunk with good movement and beautifully created *shari* is masked by the lowest branch. The remaining branches are not clearly defined due to the lack of refinement of the foliage pads. Very dense foliage on upper part of the tree including apical region. Once these factors are remedied, we will have a prize-winning tree. Overall balance between tree and pot is very good, with tidy surface dressing.



**Pinus sylvestris:**

Height - 78 cms.

Not quite there yet, but another tree with considerable potential. The basic design concept is good with the position of the tree in its pot well placed to counter the outward movement of the trunk beyond the periphery of the pot. Work needs to be done in wiring and refining the branch structure; also with further back-budding, there could be an excellent foliage mass in due course. The primitive-style pot reflects the ruggedness of the trunk, bark and *shari*.



We have here 3 trees, a *Crataegus*, an *Ulmus parvifolia* and a *Juniperus chinensis* that I dismissed on my first stage of selection.

Apart from a complete lack of styling to the branches, the *Crataegus* was dismissed immediately on the condition of presentation; algae on both trunk and pot, heavy overgrowth of moss, possibly trying to mask the extraordinary overhanging root. Take it home, do a lot of work and you could have a nice tree.

The *Ulmus* is far too immature for showing. The branch structure has yet to develop, the branches all starting from the same point are all of equal thickness and choices need to be made on how many you require. A nice pot, a healthy tree but it needs time and development

Oh dear, what happened to the apex on the Chinese juniper? You refined all the lower branches quite successfully but did you get tired before you reached the top. Take it home and thin out and shape the apex and then we will look again.

The adjacent images are of the same *Juniperus chinensis*. *Left*; Initially, the tree was rejected for award winning at exhibition as the foliage mass needed to be opened more and refined.

*Right*; A few years later, the whole image was clearer, the foliage pads were better defined and tidier resulting in an award for its quality.



***Pinus pentaphylla***: Height - 58 cms.

*Left*; A superb example of a semi-cascade style with a well developed trunk, neatly positioned branches and well developed foliage pads. Good healthy color of the needles. The whole image is of a tree, groomed and superbly styled, complimented by a rugged pot which reflects the contours of the tree. Needless to say, this specimen was one of the top award winning trees in a recent British bonsai exhibition.

