

Selection of raw material

Where to look

Hedgerows

Traditional British countryside habitat providing homes for many species of birds, small mammals, and insects, etc.

Many garden hedges are routinely uprooted to make way for garden makeovers. Wild hedges also are often cleared to make way new roads etc, and are ideal source of mature material.

Garden Material

Usually non native tree and shrub species frequently subjected to regular pruning and allowed to grow for many years.

Some very good bonsai have been created from this material particularly from species such as Escalonia, Potentilla, Cotoneaster, Euonymus and others.

Yamadori

A dubious practice usually carried out by people with strange spiky haircuts or black pick-up trucks, carrying rucksacks, during the wee small hours of the morning.

Wild trees growing in marginal habitats are notoriously difficult to lift successfully but can become very valuable bonsai.

Forestry

Manmade environments usually planted with fast growing commercial species, usually on poor agricultural soils.

The best potential bonsai found here are those growing along the edges of forest rides, which are often heavily grazed by deer and regular cut to keep tracks passable to vehicles.

Quarries and Mines

These sites are often devoid of real topsoil if not partially poisonous to plant life.

Those trees which do grow here are often severely stunted and can make excellent bonsai once restored to health.

Plant nurseries

Most nurseries are stocked with young vigorous material not considered ideal for bonsai

Material from this source can however be very useful for those new to bonsai, it is relatively cheap and easily acquired and will not cause sleepless nights if it does not survive its transformation. It is important to choose the right species to start but with patience these may still make excellent bonsai. Yews, Some Junipers, Chamaeciparis 'boulevard' and some dwarf cultivars are all potentially useful. Take someone who knows what they are looking for.

Specialist bonsai nurseries

All kinds of material from many sources varying widely in quality can be found here and is usually the most expensive but fastest bonsai option.

Mass produced imported 'bonsai farm', trees are often sold as finished trees but frequently possess unsightly flaws which can take much skill and many years to correct effectively, choose carefully.

Layers

Good bonsai do grow on trees it's getting them off them that's the problem.

Many large trees may have smaller branches and roots which might exhibit the perfect qualities for making a bonsai. Most but not all species can be layered in some way, look for damaged or weather beaten limbs. Old gnarled and twisted roots often have far more character than the branches above them, if they are also prone to suckering these can become very pleasing bonsai.

Seeds, cuttings and grafts.

Although the slowest methods of creating a bonsai tree, the use of seeds, cuttings and small layers can be the most rewarding. It allows a degree of control over material which other approaches do not.

Most suitable for developing material for forests, root on or over rock and creating shohin and mame.

However you choose to source your trees there are some a few points to bear in mind when collecting. First and foremost, does the plant possess an agreeable growth habit, trees with great vigour, long internodes or large leaves are unlikely to make satisfactory bonsai and tend to steal attention from more congenial material. Choose subjects with short internodes small leaves, moderate vigour and a pleasing bark texture.

When collecting from old quarries or forestry land, aspect is very important. Trees growing on dry, sunny slopes are much more apt to make promising bonsai than those growing in damp shade

Some species such as fuchsias, birches or willows can be quite short lived, easily attacked by fungal diseases or prone to random die-back, respectively. Even species which are very well suited to bonsai culture present some challenges to the grower, this after all is why we all do it. Even so, bonsai is a difficult discipline to master, so it is wise to make progress as easy as possible for one's self. Select tried and trusted material whenever available.

There are a number of desirable structural traits to be looked for once you have found a potential bonsai subject. These are listed below, sectioned underlined are those which I believe to be virtually indispensable ingredients for any good bonsai recipe.

Trunk

This is the main focal point of a bonsai and holds the entire design together. If you don't have a trunk, you don't have a tree.

- ***Taper*** The ideal taper should appear to start beneath the soil and reach up into the crown of the tree. It should also display an even progression without knots or discontinuities.
- ***Texture*** The bark of a tree, more than any other attribute, is responsible for lending a bonsai its apparent age, which may often be far less than many observers imagine. Smooth bark appears young whilst a rough surface tends to appear older.
- ***Scale*** The relative proportions of trunk and branches give a bonsai its scale. Miniaturisation is an essential element of bonsai, however good a trunk may be if the branches growing from it are too large the image will fail. Similarly, large wounds and course, unconvincing deadwood can rob an otherwise fine tree of much of its charm.

Primary branch arrangement

Good bonsai material must either already possess or have the potential to grow a sufficient number of well placed branches to allow the viewer to believe it is a large tree.

- **Arrangement** The standard model for branch arrangement has branches growing in groups of three, from the largest at the bottom to the smallest at the tree's apex. Branches should originate on the outside of any curves with no two directly perpendicular, *ideally*.
- **Structure** Any primary branches present should complement the shape and style of the trunk. For instance, a straight trunk should give rise to straightish branches.
- **Bifurcation** A common problem with raw material is a lack of small secondary and tertiary branches which are near enough to the trunk to facilitate the creation of a proportionally correct foliage canopy.

Buttress

Often called a nebari, the buttress is the visible portion of the root system including the swelling at the base of a tree where roots and trunk fuse together.

- **Function** First and foremost the root system must be sufficiently robust to fully maintain the health and vigour of the tree. Material which lacks enough roots to survive, however beautiful, is worthless as a bonsai. Collected material must be lifted with a viable root mass and allowed to recover vigour before any training is undertaken. Newly purchased material should also be allowed a recovery period unless it is from a trusted source.
- **Balance** A good buttress centres and stabilises a bonsai. An evenly distributed, mature root system provides a powerful visual connection the earth and adds great presence to any bonsai.
- **Aesthetics** Roots are also extremely important when selecting the front of a bonsai tree. The most pleasing and frequently used devise is to place a large root to either side of the trunk whilst avoiding any which point directly toward the viewer.

Foliage

The magic bit that turns sunshine into food.

- **Conifers** With a few notable exceptions, such as yew and sequoias, conifers can only manufacture chlorophyll within their leaves or needles. It is therefore essential to ensure that conifers possess sufficient foliage mass when collected to support the rest of the tree's living tissues.
- **Size & colour** Choose plants with small attractive leaves whenever able. Consider also autumn and spring colour in deciduous species.
- **Deciduous** Broadleaf trees are highly prized for their fine twig ramification during winter. This structure can be very difficult to promote in some species ie willow and hawthorn. Whych elm is also difficult, by contrast English elm is ideal.

Fruit and flowers

Frequently regarded as an inconvenience to bonsai growers, attractive flowers and fruit such as those of crab apples or cotoneasters can make a pleasant addition to a bonsai collection. Trees with small fruit and flowers are obviously the best.

Were one fortunate enough to discover, in some secluded corner of a long neglected garden, an ancient perfectly formed miniature shrub, possessing all the aforementioned ideal qualities, I seriously doubt it would make an outstanding bonsai. Of course there is no such as a perfect bonsai so the suggestion is academic. When selecting a bonsai there will always be an element of compromise involved. It is this plethora of imperfections which renders every bonsai unique and ensures that we will never get bored of looking at new images.

The above is an attempt to formalize the selection of material which might make a good bonsai. Not for-bearing all of this I still collect material which fails to comply with almost everything previously written. The rule is this; if you feel very strongly about a piece of material even though you may not know why, **trust your feelings.**