

# **A Quick Guide to Critiquing Trees**

by Frank W. Harris

Some time back I was given the opportunity to give a short talk on Jamie's collecting "dos and don'ts" and which ancient trees to collect from the wild. And, then, an even shorter talk followed on: "Styling collected trees" and "The importance to identifying the Visual Center of a tree."

At our March meeting of the Show of Trees, once again Jamie, our 52<sup>nd</sup> President Extraordinaire" has inspired me to contribute. He shock and awed us when, once again, he demonstrated his superlative knowledge and artistic abilities. He is certainly a Phoenix Bonsai Society treasure for so many reasons. One can only hope we do not lose him (on our next California trip) to an apprenticeship for several years to one of the great Masters in LA. Ya gotta love this guy!

Well, all those accolades aside, we discussed finding the Focal Point or Visual Center of a tree and how a talented artist (like Jamie) can sort out what is possible, what is feasible, and what will work artistically, while keeping within the boundaries set by the tree itself. This is where having the talent (like Jamie) to see the tree within is important and where having the tools to see many possible futures of the material, without committing to any with cutters is so valuable. Each of us as artists may see different futures depending on their own talent and vision, but, in the end, all that matters is that the result is artistically feasible and visually pleasing.

I recently came across the following article (published in 1971) which is still true today and thought I might share it with the club.

## **THREE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN OBSERVING BONSAI MATERIAL**

An article by Richard Ota, reprinted from Bonsai of California, vol. 5, 1971, California Bosai Society, Los Angeles, California.

Bonsai is mainly enjoyed and contemplated by viewers for the composite splendor created by the marriage between material and container.

However, in the choice of material for bonsai, generally speaking, there are three principle requirements in order to realize the maximum potential of a tree. They are: first, nebari (root stretch) and tachigari (lower trunk); second, trunk and braches; and third, the shin (apex).

## 1. Nebari and Tachiagari.

The configuration of the tree from the point that the surface root leaves the soil to the first branch of the tree forms the initial element, and this element is the first thing that must be studied in searching for potential material for a bonsai. A tree whose exposed root system radiates uniformly from the trunk typifies a huge, old tree and is said to have good nabari.

On the other hand, a tree which has large surface roots only on one side is called kata-nebari and normally lacks balance and beauty.

The tachiagari, for best appearance, requires stability at the base of the trunk with a gradual taper upward. A look of vigor and vitality is also necessary. A graceful contour of the trunk, the roughness and hue of the bark, and the formation of the first branch all should magnify the feeling of age, strength and size of the tree.

## 2. Trunk and Branches.

It is desirable that the trunk is an extension of a well developed tachiagari and that it continues to taper gradually toward the apex.

Other than the normally rounded trunk, there are: nefi-ken, twisted trunk; kobu-kan, knobby trunk; saba-miki, split trunk; shari-kan, trunk with bare wood exposed; and, nishiki-sho, crooked bark, all which enhance the feeling of age and ruggedness rather than immature fragility.

Simply because a tree has branches growing in all directions around the trunk, it cannot be considered material of merit; for how a limb branches from the trunk greatly affects the ultimate excellence of the bonsai. The first branch should extend either to the left or right from the trunk about one-third of the distance from the soil to the ultimate tip. Length and thickness of the branches as well as the direction should be varied, being careful to avoid merely leaving branches to the right and left, giving the tree the appearance of a dried fish bone and totally lacking in artistic value.

The branches of the pine family must display strength while trees of the broadleaf varieties must ascent the delicate formation of the extended twigs.

### 3. Shin (apex)

Shin is the extreme top of the bonsai, and evidence of continued growth is a sign of viability. Regardless of the fullness of the leaves hiding most of the branches and the trunk, the apex should be evident. A tree would not be classified as a bonsai if the shin were not discernible, or if the shin were placed in an absurd position, or if it had two separate shin. However, exceptions are acceptable in training a broom style bonsai (such as zelkova and elms). With California junipers dug from the wild, zin (dead portion) can be used as shin.

These are the elements essential in making a good bonsai and these are things to observe in searching for bonsai material.