

*"Bonsai is best experienced over many years, one moment at a time. I suppose maybe all of life is that way..." –Dan Wiederrecht*

While many other bonsai club newsletters dedicate yet another article to the work of repotting, I want to shift our focus to a different and exciting aspect of spring bonsai: **the evaluation and acquisition of nursery stock material for use in our bonsai practice.** As Backcountry Dan suggests, the art of bonsai is best appreciated in how the present moment is woven into the long tapestry of time. Now is the moment when garden nurseries are filling their coffers with new trees that would be an awesome addition to your collection. Some might turn up their nose at such sourced material. I would argue that nursery stock has many sought-after qualities that afford the bonsaiist the opportunity to tighten their gloves and step into the ring. Being a relative newcomer to the art myself, I can say without a doubt that the trees I have gathered from local nurseries have allowed me the most freedom to take my technical skill as a bonsai artist to the next level.

**Attributes abound.** Nursery stock is relatively inexpensive. It is already containerized, and usually pot-bound. It often tolerates severe root reduction without batting an eyelash. Trees may have dense branching for thoughtful evaluation and selection in primary styling. A mindboggling array of species are available, including dwarf cultivars and flowering varieties. It is readily available and found everywhere from big-box hardware stores to boutique garden centers. Material for bonsai is often less desirable for landscapes and may be available at reduced prices (check at the end of the season for half-off deals). While very few nursery trees will become truly "world-class" bonsai, with the right care and vision, most will make impressive compositions that your friends will drool over.

Many RMBS members utilize nursery material in their practice. Mike Horine is perhaps the most prolific, and some of his works are true masterpieces. His Japanese flowering quince in an Iker pot is a sight to behold, and an olfactory experience. I am certain that Mike would be the first to caution the prospective "nursery stalker" not every tree that grabs your attention is worth putting into the back of your Subaru: **you need to know how to effectively and efficiently evaluate stock material to be certain you take home something worthy of a lifetime of attention.** Below are some of the characteristics I seek when evaluating such material, and a quick look at some trees that have made it home to the garden. Thank you to Bonsai Mirai for the insight.

- 1) Look for trees that draw your attention.** Is it the tiny leaves or compact needles? The aged bark? The spreading roots? Interesting branches? Colorful flowers? Unique movement or deadwood? An unusual species? **Rule #1 is the "love at first sight" test.** Analogous to the human interaction, there may be a lot of baggage below the surface to avoid. Better to know before you take it home. But one must love something to dedicate a lifetime to its care, no?

Below we have a shapely pine with a lovely trunk worthy of care and affection. However, further soil work revealed an unattractive inverse taper which is difficult to overcome.



- 2) **Look for basal flare and a strong nebari.** A massive, radial root flare provides stability and is highly prized. Being able to assess the nebari on stock trees is difficult. Pull down the burlap if you are able and remove mulch and soil. Work your fingers down into the pot to see if you can find structural roots. If you can, great! Often, you must bet they are present. Sometimes you lose this bet. Below is a Japanese maple with imperfect nebari, but with good flare that adds stability to the composition. The base was halfway down the 5-gallon nursery container and I had no idea what I had until I got home and potted it. Below is a 2-year progression.





- 3) **Identify interesting trunk movement.** You can almost always move branches; the trunk is more difficult. Finding a piece with good trunk movement might mean taking it home. You often won't be disappointed. Below is a Chinese juniper I got half-off (\$13) at Walmart that looked like every other bush on the shelf in September. I was drawn to in the intertwined twin trunks that add interest. At the price, I figured it would pay dividends in wiring practice alone. Here's the tree 2 years out of the nursery can with severe root and foliage reduction.



- 4) **Unique branching is really something:** This factor is to be considered *after* the ones above. Recall branching can be manipulated. However, unique branches that are naturally created can “make” a mediocre tree exceptional. The following tree is a clump-style dappled Japanese willow with variegated foliage that turns pink in autumn. I passed over two more expensive, traditional appearing trees at the garden center because this tree has small interesting foliage and some very “unnatural” near 90-degree bends that are amazing. I repotted it from a 5-gallon container prior to the bud push last month.



- 5) **Special features add value:** This is really that “X” factor. Often it is a deadwood feature (*jin* or *shari*) that tell a tortured tale of the tree’s life. I am drawn to these focal points when evaluating such material. I can forgive quite a few flaws in a tree if it displays such special interest. Below is a Kintzley’s Ghost honeysuckle with large leaves and poor ramification that makes up for its deficiencies with fantastic deadwood and yellow flowers in the summer. Given its nature as a climber, fine branching is eclipsed by lyrical limb movement. Container is by RMBS potter Bill Sample. This tree is only one season in training.





Your brother in bonsai,

Andy Berry

(p):303-910-5756 (e): [andrb0304@gmail.com](mailto:andrb0304@gmail.com)