

How to Judge a Bonsai Show

A Guide for a Member
Judged Show*

Asheville Bonsai
Society



* Judging guidelines courtesy of Boon Manakitivipart and Bay Island Bonsai

Why Member Judge a Bonsai Show?

- Creates greater involvement in the event for club members
- Provides an alternative to finding an “outside” or objective “expert judge”
- Provides a learning opportunity for club members on what makes a great bonsai



How to judge a Bonsai

Trunk (1-10 Points)


Branches (1-5 Points)

Rootage (1-5 Points)

Pot Selection (1-5 Points)

Aesthetic Qualities of Bonsai (1-5 Points)

Aesthetic Qualities of Overall Display (1-5 Points)



Minimum score: = 6
Maximum score = 35



Trunk (1-10 Points)

- Understanding characteristics of a bonsai's trunk are critical, 'the soul of the bonsai is found in the trunk'. For that reason this category is awarded the most points
- Ideal trunks are dependent on style and species, nature informs us about desired shapes and forms
- When evaluating trunk curves, taper, jin, shari, bark quality and color we should refer to the idealized forms in nature, for example:
 - A cryptomeria trunk line should be ramrod straight
 - A juniper should have strong curves and good lifelines
 - An informal maple or pine should have good taper
 - A Japanese beech's bark should be white as possible

TRUNK: Detailed guidelines of what to look for in common bonsai:

- **Japanese Black Pine:** High quality should have “good” bark, best have thick plates that run vertically or are formed as diamond shaped plates call turtleback plate. Formal upright and informal upright pine styles should have good taper and be free of large “knuckles” on the trunk. Taper can be either fast (masculine) or more “slender” (feminine). Slender trees should have more curves. Natural jin and shari could be a plus, but they do not last long on black pines
- **Japanese White Pine:** (or five needle pine) is considered a more feminine tree than black pine. Flaky bark from the base up is desirable and requires thirty years or more to develop. Older grafted white pines are examined to determine if the bark matches at the grafting point. Grafted white pine must have good taper and mature bark from grafting point to be considered a high-quality tree. Jin and shari last longer on white pine and are often included.
- **Scale Junipers:** Including Shimpaku juniper, California juniper, and Sierra juniper are not always judged by a fast taper. Exciting curves and twists in the trunk are important in judging scale junipers. Interesting natural jin and shari are important qualities. A prominent live vein, contrasting deadwood on the trunk is another desirable feature. Formal upright styles are not generally suitable for junipers
- **Needle Junipers,** procumbens, or San Jose junipers may have a fast taper. Curves and twists in the trunk are also desirable. Again, Jin and shari ,as well as a defined live vein are notable attributes to look for. Formal upright is more commonly acceptable with these styles
- **Japanese Maples** must have aged, gray trunks to receive high judging marks. Young trunks are green and should be judged as a young tree. Gentle movements and smooth bark without large scars are what you are looking for. Large open wounds, jin and shari are not a desirable quality for Japanese Maples
- **Trident Maples** have more of a rough masculine feeling in the trunk. Fast taper is one of the qualities to look for. They may have a massive trunk base. Well established tridents maples have more indentations and a gnarled feeling while still being covered in smooth bark. Large open wounds are undesirable.
- **Japanese Beech** should have a smooth and light-colored bark, and a well tapered trunk to be viewed as a quality Japanese beech



Branches (1-5 Points)

- Branches should have the same overall feel and appearance as the trunk
- The tree with a “fast” taper should have “fast” tapered branches
- The tree with a slender delicate trunk should have slender branches
- Ideally branches should not be thicker than $\frac{1}{3}$ the size of the trunk, where they emerge (deciduous trees with good movement exception in some cases)
- Trees with fewer curves in trunk should have fewer curves in branches
- High quality tree always has good ramification, defined by the transition from coarse to fine branching



Rootage (1-5 Points)

- Rootage should flare out from the base in all directions anchoring the tree to the soil. This is a characteristic of mature, established, quality bonsai
- Rootage (or Nebari) gives stability to the tree. Old trees in nature with a large root -base look like they have a solid hold onto the earth
- Fused roots around the base of the deciduous tree make the bonsai look older
- In collected juniper and some bunjin styles, the rootage is not as important for judging purposes

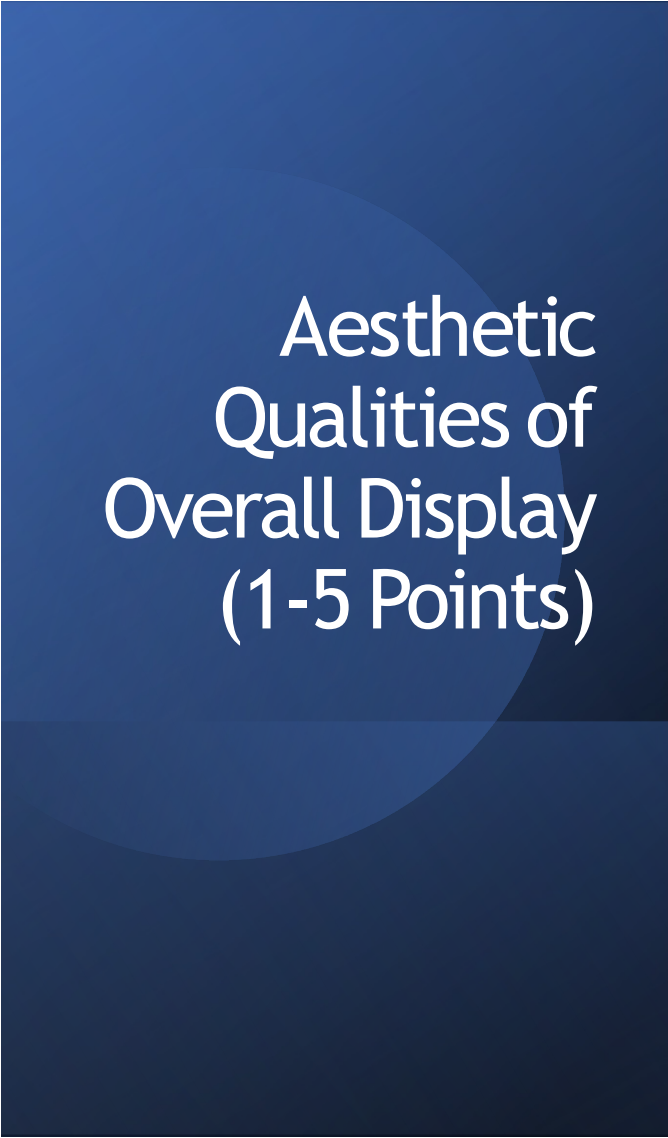
Pot Selection (1-5 Points)

- These guidelines are the most general of rules. It takes a lifetime of practice and study to pick the best color and shape of a pot for a tree. Some considerations/guidelines:
- Size: Length of pot should generally be about 2/3 height of tree. Height of pot should be about the diameter of trunk. The width of a pot must allow adequate space, soil and cultivation without overwhelming the tree
- Pot Shape: round shallow pots suitable for slender, tall trees. Oval pots for trees with curves or forest plantings. Rectangular pots suitable for multiple styles as long as there is a masculine feeling. Sometimes a short fat tree is potted in a very deep pot to add to a feeling of strength.
- Color of Pot: Unglazed brown, grey, or purple primarily for conifers. Glazed colored pots for deciduous trees, flowering and fruiting trees, and broad-leafed evergreen trees
- Patina or the visible appearance of age on a pot is highly desirable. Visible age of pot and tree should complement each other



Aesthetic Qualities of Bonsai (1-5 Points)

- These five points are the most challenging and contemplative to award. By viewing good trees over time you will develop a sense of aesthetics important to bonsai
- These points are awarded for such things as balance, unity and harmony in a tree's design
- The ability to create a strong feeling or emotion on the part of the viewer is a real factor
- The feeling of age is paramount to this category
- A great bonsai should evoke the representation of nature and a strong response from the viewer



Aesthetic Qualities of Overall Display (1-5 Points)

- Judging this category is based on the relationship between the bonsai, bonsai pot, stand, accent plant, and/or scroll.
- Does this display make a unified artistic statement?
- Are the elements of the display in harmony with each other?
- Do the components of the display make a statement that is “more than the sum of the parts”. This is the essence of a successful display

General Guidelines on Awarding Points)

- For the generally good, give a median score (for example 5 for trunk, 3 for remaining categories)
- In general, good trees should receive marks around 20 points
- To give a maximum score on any category, the tree should be outstanding on that dimension. Probably one of the best you have seen in the exhibit. Only exceptional quality trees should receive full points
- If you see flaws, be willing to give a low mark. On flaws, consider is this a major or minor flaw. Is it easily fixed? Do you forgive the flaw because of the age or wild nature of the tree? Is the flaw in process of being corrected? Is it acceptable in one species and not in another?
- Walk the exhibit once or twice before starting to judge to provide yourself a sense of calibration with the range of trees being judged