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Forests

The word bonsai conjures up images of a single gnarled tree standing in splendid isolation, weathered by years of toil in a harsh climate. But this is not always the case. Group and Forest plantings offer the bonsai enthusiast a whole different set of challenges, and the results can be spectacular, especially when deciduous trees display their autumn colours. Forest plantings called Yose-ue (pronounced jose wue) evoke feelings of tranquility and peacefulness, and staring into the depths of a yose-ue one can become entranced. It's like staring into a fish tank or the old dying coals of a campfire.

One would generally use ? sub standard? trees for a forest. By sub standard I refer to trees that may have a few small defects that would take a huge amount of work to turn into good stand-alone trees. These may be trees with foliage only on one side, or only on top, or trees with straight and fairly boring trunks. One can also use a forest to train seedlings for later use as stand-alone trees. Of course it goes without saying that the better the material the better the end result.

As you would imagine, there are a lot of design rules or principles pertaining to forest planting so here are some of the more important ones.

Always use an odd number of trees, even numbers are boring to the eye. The only time an even number can be used is for two trees, or if there is a large number of trees, 20 or 30. A planting with three trees is called a Group, a planting with five or more trees is a Forest.

Never plant trees so that three or more line up in a straight line. Nature does not plant in straight lines. Always follow a logical rule of dominance, ie, one tree or group of trees, must be the tallest and the most dominant, the surrounding trees must be shaped and sized to enhance this dominance. If you split your five-tree group into two smaller groups then one group must be dominant over the other. Trees are generally grouped together as a family, the father is the most dominant, the mother the secondary tree and less dominant (sorry ladies but it's not my idea), and the child or children of minor dominance.

As far as the positioning of the trees on the surface goes, be creative. Remember though, according to Zen philosophy, the perfect center of anything is reserved for Buddha because only Buddha is perfect. Never plant anything in the exact center of a pot, and never visually divide a pot through the center.

The focal point or most dominant tree is usually closer to one side with more negative space on the other creating movement, the more negative space, the more an impression of distance is created. A small tree or rock at the far end may increase this illusion.

By positioning small trees in front of larger ones a feeling of perspective is created, planting the large trees in front and the smaller ones at the back gives the impression of a close-up view.

Forests can be planted on a variety of flat surfaces. Ready made trays and shallow pots are available, but my favorite is slate. One can also make imitation rock trays out of wire and fiberglass. These have the advantage of being light and strong and can be shaped as desired. When planting on these flat surfaces one need not even make drainage holes as the water drains out from the base, and actually one needs to try and retain a little water for forests as they dry out quickly. You may want to drill a few holes in strategic positions to enable you to anchor your larger trees from below with wire.

Once your forest is planted, watering must be as gentle as possible for a month or two. You will be amazed as to how quickly the roots bind and moss forms, very soon your forest will be held tightly onto the slate. A forest planting is one of the few occasions when moss is encouraged to grow on the soil. Its likeness to miniature grass is obvious and as already pointed out it binds the soil like grass does. Just don't let too much grow on the trunks themselves as it rots the tree after a while.

In the strictest sense one should use all of the same tree species for a forest or group planting. All of the trees in the planting should be of the same style, if one is windswept they must all be windswept.

Observe what happens in a real forest. The interior is dark so the trunks of those trees are bare of foliage, side branches reach out towards the light while those facing inwards die. The canopies of a group of trees together should be considered as one single canopy and should be shaped to form a harmonious silhouette.

Apparently it is frowned upon to include small miniature figurines and buildings in true forest plantings but frankly I love them. They enhance the mood of the planting and also provide some point of reference for the size of the trees. But wait, surely you have seen pictures of stunning bonsai landscapes with little Chinese fishermen, pagodas and imitation rivers complete with resident dragon. These are called Sei-kei and not considered as pure bonsai. They fall into a group of natural art forms along with bonsai and various other disciplines like rock planting which originated in China so many thousands of years ago. However bonsai enthusiasts very often dabble with these other disciplines and very often one will see rocks and rock plantings displayed along with sei-kei, bonsai and koi.