Bonsai Forests

By Penny and Barbara

Bonsai forests are group plantings in which varying numbers of trees are assembled in large shallow pots to give the illusion of a natural grove of trees. They are constructed from trees of a single species with trunks that are of similar shapes but vary in height, trunk size, and branch heights. Aside from the obvious aesthetic value of a forest planting, an advantage of this style is that it is possible to utilize immature and imperfect trees while achieving a pleasing composition within a relatively short period of time. On the other hand, once the trees in the forest have matured, it is sometimes possible to disassemble the forest and style the individual trees.

Preparing the Pot: Forests are planted in long oval or rectangular pots or on flat rock slabs. Initially they may be planted in wooden training boxes and transferred to a pot one or two years later. Ideally, the pots or boxes should have several drainage holes, particularly in the corners of the pots to allow for good drainage. In preparing the pot, the drainage holes need to be first covered with a rigid mesh screen. Long pieces of wires are then threaded through the drainage holes to be used later to secure the root balls and hold the trees in place. Alternatively thick wires can be run across the pot to create a framework. Smaller wires attached to the thick wire framework can then be used to wire the entire trunks of individual trees.

Peter Adams, at the 2008 Bonsai Symposium in Rochester, demonstrated yet another method in which he cut a mesh screen in the shape of the pot and then attached wires at each spot where a tree would be located. He created the forest directly on the mesh grid, attaching the root balls of the trees securely with the wires. The completed forest was then transferred to the pot and the mesh was wired into place through the drainage holes (Figure 1). After a year or two of growth when the roots have fused to form a single root mass, the mesh will be detached from the trees during transplanting and then cleaned and reused for another forest planting.

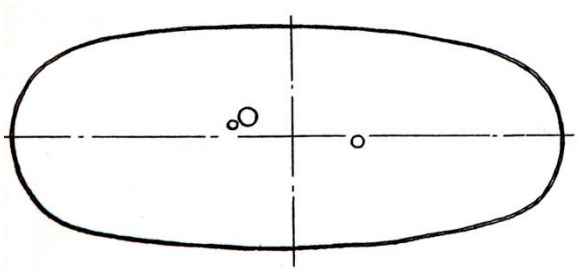
Figure 1: Peter Adams creating a forest

Creating the Forest: Forests are generally created with an uneven number of trees although once the number has exceeded 13 this is less important. A minimum of 5 to 7 trees are required and large forests may contain up to 50 trees. Usually the trunks are relatively straight but branching can be very irregular since the trees within a forest often have very few branches. Also, once the forest has been created, it is viewed as a canopy rather than as individual trees. Although many species of trees can be used to create forests, good ones to start with are larch, Japanese or Trident maples, and Blauuw junipers. When collecting trees for a forest, it is a good idea to keep 2 or 3 of the original trees in individual pots in case some of the forest trees die and need to be replaced by similar trees of the same general size.

One of the most important skills to develop is the placement of the trees. The most common type of forest planting is a “Near Forest” in which the tallest and thickest tree is near the front with smaller trees in the rear. As the name implies, this gives the appearance of looking into a nearby forest. The small trees in the rear give a sense of depth to the composition. In contrast, a “Far Forest” has the largest tree in the rear of the pot and smaller trees closer to the front giving the illusion of distant forest. A third variation is a windswept forest in which the largest trees are at one end of the pot and the remaining trees are spread out to the other end of the pot in the order of height and thickness. The trees often lean in the direction of the smaller trees giving the composition a wind-blown appearance.

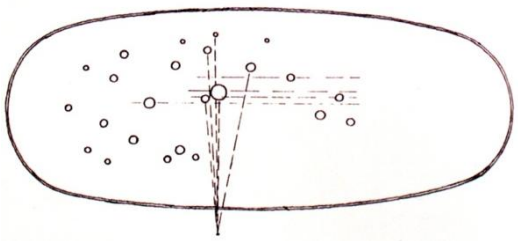
To create a near forest, first the trees are sorted according to size and thickness of the trunks with the tallest and thickest labeled as tree #1 or the principal tree. The roots are trimmed to remove any roots that will prevent placing the trees close together and if no small trees are available, some of the medium sized trees may be cut back to create smaller ones. It’s a good idea to have a spitzer bottle of water handy to spray the roots while working on them. The following is an example of how a near forest could be created (see figures 2 and 3). The #1 tree (the principal tree) is first placed near the centre of the pot. Number 2 tree, which does not need to be as tall as the principal tree but should complement it, is placed some distance from and slightly in front of tree #1. A thin and short contrasting third tree is placed very close to and slightly in front of tree #1 to accentuate the larger size of the more dominant tree. You will notice that the three form a triangle of unequal sides (figure 2).

Figure 2: Placement of the first 3 trees



The remaining trees are then positioned asymmetrically to form two groups with the largest group surrounding the principal tree and a smaller group around tree #2. The smallest trees are placed in the rear of the composition to create depth. To give a natural look to the composition, some of the trees on the edge may be inclined towards the outside of the pot. Before completing the forest composition, it is important to ensure that all of the tree trunks are visible from the front and side views and that the spaces between trees are asymmetrical. This creates a more natural looking forest with a triangular canopy created by the tallest tree in the middle and the shorter trees on the edges. There is frequently a space between the main and secondary groups through which “birds can fly” and a space at the end of the pot containing the secondary group. The “flow” of the composition is from the denser group around the principal tree towards the secondary group and the space at the edge of the pot (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Placement of additional trees



Completion of the Forest Planting: Once the trees have been wired into place, soil is added to the pot forming uneven mounds over the root balls and air pockets are removed using chop sticks. Trees are pruned to remove branches growing towards the interior of the forest as these tend to die back from lack of light. Trees on the edges or in the rear can be pruned back to create smaller trees if necessary. Moss is generally applied to the forest floor as a finishing touch.

The space between the two main groups may be accentuated by a small valley or pathway or may contain flat stones to emulate a river bed. Sometimes small viewing stones or figurines of cabins or forest animals are placed at the rear of the valley. Rocks can also form an important integral part of the composition giving the illusion of mountain peaks or forming the rocky banks of river beds. Another variation is to plant trees within the rocks in the composition.

Care of the Forest: Once planted, the forest should be watered well and placed out of the sun and wind for a few weeks to recover. It should then be gradually moved into the sun and fertilized a month or two later. The sides of the forest should be pruned more vigorously than the larger central trees to maintain the differential in thicknesses of the trees. After a year or two the forest can be transplanted from a training box to a pot. At this time the roots should have fused to form a single root ball which is trimmed like that of a single tree.