

Columbus Bonsai Society Newsletter - December 2002

Bonsai and that Pesky Scalene Triangle

Ever wonder what all the talk concerning that scalene triangle is all about. Just why is it so important in bonsai. Most of them have more curves than straight lines so why not an oval?

Is that scalene triangle a triangle or just a group of reference points for height, width and depth. A boundary so to speak in which our bonsai is confined. If so why ?

Just how does a tree's growth pattern relate to that scalene triangle ? How does it make our little bonsai seem so big, so old and massive? Why, of all things is it so important ?

I have posed some big questions here. The answers to which are not all that complicated but will take more than just a few words to answer. Surprisingly enough most of the answers have nothing to do with bonsai. Bonsai is more an art of illusion than anything else. We take something small and try to make it look as big and as old as we can. Forget art for a bit and lets just go with the illusion. Think about what makes things look big.

Go to the tallest building you can find. Look up. The walls seem to converge. The top of the building will seem to lean toward you. Look left and right. The sidewalk and the top of the building will start to converge off in the distance.

These are the visual cues that the brain associates with a large object. In bonsai we exaggerate these cues. The angles of our outline are more pronounced. The lean at the top a bit greater.

In bonsai we crunch down a 60 foot tree to a much smaller area. The brain is fooled by the "triangles" we see. What was small is now big.

The answer to the first part of the question is perspective . Or better yet trickery. This has nothing to do with art, just setting the stage. Fooling the brain to think something is bigger.

Are we talking triangles or just converging lines?

All of us have seen that straight road that goes on forever. The edges of that road seems to almost come to a point way off in the distance. We know that the road is a constant 20 feet wide so why does the road appear to be much narrower way off in the horizon? Our eyes distort the road. Items further away seem smaller. The brain interprets this as distance.

The same thing happens when up look up at a tall object. The sides converge. This is something we can use to fool the brain. Convince it that our little tree is much larger than it actually is.

Consider the trunk of the bonsai. What is usually desired is a trunk with movement and good taper. Nothing new there. But that taper makes the trunk look taller, older and more massive. Increasing that taper will make it look taller. A drastic taper will seem to make it more massive.

The same goes with a branch when viewed from the trunk out. With trees our brain associates age with size and mass. This taper gives us mass thus perceived age. Using the same principle and looking upward the brain expects the lower branches to appear longer than those further away.

So now lets fool the senses.

We set the viewer up. We dictate where the eyes go to by adjusting the viewing height of our bonsai forcing the viewers eyes to a point about half way up the trunk of our little tree. Now that the eyes are there we have all those converging lines radiating out from that spot. Presto, the tree appears taller, more massive. This is trick number one.

One thing to remember though is once I put all these converging lines together to form our bonsai is that I do come up with a triangle of sorts. So now we are back to the beginning. Just why is that scalene triangle so important.

First and foremost is perspective. Forced perspective at that.

There are other more subtle reasons. The triangle implies:

1. Stability - The triangle is a shape with a wide base and therefore can not be easily knocked over (blown over?). The relativity of this to bonsai should be obvious, age=stability.
2. Scalene - symmetry is also a sign of stability but it does not include a lot of variety and/or interest. In bonsai terms, the symmetrical tree could become a tree by rote rather than a tree of artistic merit. Scalene is NOT symmetrical so avoids that problem but therefore needs stability of the triangle. Therefore a scalene (non-symmetrical) triangle.
3. Implied - By creating a bonsai with just the limits or corners of a scalene triangle evident, the artist requires the viewer to become a participant in the artistic work therefore adding interest for the viewer.

Are there other artistic schemes? Of course! Should all bonsai be forced into the scalene triangle format? Of course not!

So where does the scalene triangle fit in? As a guideline; as a beginning; as a safety net; as a tool. Just another thing we do to fool the senses into thinking something is bigger than it is. What goes on in that triangle is the artistic part of the equation. But first we must create the illusion. Give the brain what it needs to think on a grander scale.

Take a photograph of a large tree. Make sure that there is nothing else in that picture that will give one a sense of scale. No cars, buildings, people, etc. That 60 foot tall tree is now reduced to a 3x5 inch piece of paper. But even in the photo it still looks big.

Look closely at that photo. Find those converging lines (or triangles if you wish). See how the brain was fooled by that small photo. Now all we have to do is repeat this in our bonsai. There

are other tricks we have to fool the brain. Visual weight is one that comes to mind. But that is a subject much more complex and deserves an article of its own.

The most important thing to remember is that all these tricks are just tools. Just like those scissors, wire and concave cutters. Nothing more or less. Like the artist's paint brush, they are just a means to create the art. How these tools are used is up to the artist. But how and when these tools are used will govern how successful you are. Learn not only the "rules" but understand them. Know what results you derive from them. Then select the ones that fit the composition you are working on.

Ron Martin,
Tokonoma Bonsai
87 Old Trolley Rd.
Summerville SC 29485
www.tokonoma.com
rmartin@dycon.com

John Holcombe found this and sent it to me. I found it delightful and thought provoking. Ron has freely given permission for his article to be used, wishing only to further the art of bonsai and be given credit for it. Zack

December Care

Hopefully you have your tropicals inside and your outside plants securely tucked into their winter locations. If you were caught off guard it is not too late to add mulch around the pots. This may keep you from losing a pot that may crack when it freezes. I have three pots (glazed) that proved not to be as winter hardy as the plants inside them. Sometimes you just don't know if they were fired to take freezing temperatures until they either make it through a winter outside, or fail in the testing.

Your outside places should not receive direct sunlight and they should be protected from the wind. Also do not place any plants on a concrete surface for the winter. If you do not have such a place, you should put up a burlap windbreak. If we go several days without snowfall or rain, check to make sure your plants are not dried out. When temperatures are slightly above freezing, the winter wind can be very drying.

Inside, watering will occupy much of your plant care time. Look before you water. Different sized pots, plants, and locations can make winter watering quite tricky. If you keep your plants upstairs in a window, make sure the foliage doesn't touch the glass; also closing the drapes on a cold day can place your tree into an icebox. One problem I have is that my largest window faces south; on a sunny day it can get quite hot and dry a plant out quickly. So far, the orchard spray that I doused my plants with before I brought them inside seems to have prevented any bug problems.

Much to Linda's and my surprise her Jade has decided to bloom. ~ Ken Schultz

The Art of Flowering Bonsai
By Peter D. Adams

Just like most Club members – Linda and I can't resist a flowering bonsai. So it was quite natural to add this book to our collection. Peter Adams is an English author and this book was published in 1998. He has authored a number of other books as well. I'm sure we found this book at the bookstore over on Bethel, but I don't recall what we paid for it. The book is divided into two parts; the first is "How Bonsai Are Created" and is 41 pages long. This section is illustrated with many high quality drawings to illustrate the author's points. The second part is called "The Species"; this section of the book describes ten species of flowering bonsai and explains in detail their daily care. The text is complemented with over 60 color photos by Bill Jordan. I admit that it was the photos that helped me to decide that we needed this book on our bonsai bookshelf.

The first section starts with the topic of cutting the apex. Adams points out that this is necessary to redirect growth to the lower parts of the plant and to keep it from losing its taper. Next he covers root pruning, branch pruning, leaves, and wiring. Though the text is brief, there are several illustrations accompanying each. This first section goes on to cover a multitude of styling and care items.

Near the end of the first section under Sources of Material, are a few tips on encouraging root development on field collected stock and selecting and preparing nursery grown stock. One suggestion is to style the top, but allow it to grow for a year before repotting it. Surface roots are to be protected, and he encourages pruning lower older roots, keeping the fine feeder roots. He closes the first section with "Fast-grown Bonsai", stating that these are a lot of fun. He shows planting these in the ground over some type of root barrier to cause the roots to spread, like an old plate. He says these trees should be fertilized and allowed to grow in six-week spurts. Trimming should be to keep them roughly conical and to select the leader. Also some plants will need to be de-suckered – to keep them in a tree form. At the same time branches should be wired down.

The second section is sixty-five pages and covers the following species: Japanese flowering apricot; azaleas; cotoneaster; crab apple; firethorn (pyracantha), hawthorn; deciduous holly; pomegranate; quince; and wisteria. Each tree is presented with a number of quality photographs and drawings. Topics covered include: seasonal care, propagation; trimming, wiring, sources of material. Each also shows a case history – bonsai re-creation. The re-creation covers trunk, roots, branches and overall shape. The Azalea species photographs knocked my socks off. ~ Ken Schultz

Ilex Serrata (Winterberry)

At our last Board meeting we felt that the Holly was the most appropriate tree to write about this month. Several of my books and Bonsai Today have carried pictures and articles about this beautiful deciduous holly. There are other hollies that can be raised, as bonsai indeed there are both hardy outdoor evergreen types and tender indoor varieties like Okinawa holly.

Linda and I have both, an Okinawa inside under lights. It has pretty white with yellow centered flowers in the summer. And we have a cultivar that has the typical holly leaves, and small white flowers in spring. It must be a female plant with no males nearby because it has never had berries. The outdoor holly was a Dawes workday plant that was reduced in size and wired at the end of February. After three years it has begun to back bud on old wood and I now have hopes that it will develop into a good bonsai. Because it is an outdoor variety, it does stay outdoors for the winter. I do have an Ilex species that is not quite native to this zone in the basement that is evergreen, but does not have the “holly” shaped leaf.

I have to admit, that the three Ilex Serrata I have, are planted in the ground near my pond. At the end of the summer the leaves eventually fall off, revealing bright red berries. Unfortunately the berries are attractive to birds too, so they don't last very long in my yard. Ilex serrata require the presence of a male and female plant if you expect to have berries. The bark of the trees illustrated in my books, is predominately gray with a reddish undertone. While mostly smooth the trunk has a number of lighter colored bumps. One book recommends using a dull blue or yellow pot to set off the berries. And because this tree is considered to be a flowering species they also suggest an oval pot rather than rectangular.

The leaves are oval with a wavy edge, not pointy with sharp edges like American holly. During the heat of this last Summer, I discovered that this tree is sensitive to drying and full summer sun. The books note that this tree is sensitive to drying out. Spraying the leaves is recommended. If you allow it to dry it may sacrifice its leaves early, and you may have to wait until the next year to discover whether it is still alive. The books suggest a soil mix rich in sand and peat. Like rhododendrons and azaleas, they prefer an acidic mix. The books suggest repotting young specimens yearly and older trees every other year, early to mid spring. Regular feeding (every 10 days) is recommended, especially if you expect a good fruit crop. Miracle-Gro, 0-10-10 and half strength fish emulsion are suggested from bud swell, until mid-autumn.

Pruning produces many fine twigs. One source warns that the branches are brittle so “handle with care” when wiring. It is also suggested that a stub be left when taking a branch off to the trunk because hollies tend to produce a huge callus. The stub is removed at the end of the active growing period. Look at the location of buds when pruning, selecting the direction you wish the growth to take. Larger cuts should be sealed. A healthy holly will grow rapidly, any wire should be checked frequently to prevent scaring the bark.

For propagation, it is suggested that a sucker with a base heel be taken. Reportedly these cuttings root easily. I find that cuttings are best taken in the early spring. If you select your plant from a nursery look for Japanese Holly, Ilex Serrata, or Winterberry, Ilex verticillata. The pollinator is I. Serrata X I. Verticillata “Apollo”, which is a male holly.

The calendar is not complete, MABA 2003 is coming up in July. There will be registration forms at the January meeting. Jose Cueto is doing a session on literati in January. We are planning a road trip and will have a couple of other guest artists in besides our resident Jose.

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