A Beginner Stepwise Styling Guide

The following is meant to serve as a basic guide for beginning the general styling process. It can also be used in part to quickly evaluate nursery stock for purchase and then using the detail to later style the material. This will work for upright, single trunk styles (i.e. Formal and Informal Upright).

Note: The below process has been generalized to keep it simple and as in all things there are exceptions depending on the plant material you are using.
Also, other information will be needed for more specific style designs (i.e. slant, windswept, literati, forest, etc.).

1. Begin with looking at the roots and the base of the tree.
   a.   Can you see the roots?

   b.   Are they on the surface or are they further down in the soil?

   If this is Pre-bonsai (grown in a training pot) go to the next step.

   If this is Nursery material carefully dig down, cleaning away some of the soil, until you find the lateral roots
   If you cannot readily find them, very few, or they are all on one side *choose another tree and start over.*

   c.   What does the base of the tree, at the soil level, look like? Does it have 'flare'? Any movement? Texture showing age?

   Using the turntable rotate the tree; observe from all angles, until you find the widest area.
   Mark the spot as B (base)

   If the area just above the base is wider than the base, no matter what angle you use for viewing, *choose a different tree*.

2. Next look at the trunk, from bottom to top
   a.   Can you find a trunkline that follows from the base to the top of the tree? Look for a natural flow.

   b.   Does the trunk gradually taper in width up to the top?
   IF it does not taper, look for another line.

   c.   If you cannot find a line to the top try to find an alternate line with taper ending slightly or anywhere below the top.

   Mark this spot showing the best line as T (trunkline)

   IF there is no taper, *choose a different tree*.
   OR with enough branches the fault can be concealed later.

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3. Next look at the branches

IF the trunk has side to side movement (Informal Upright) the best branches will be on the outside of the curve. Otherwise "all" branches are possible candidates.

> The first branch from the base should be: the thickest, longest, most mature, etc.
> All other branches are compared to this branch; it defines the fundamental structure
> You must have back branches to create depth (3rd dimension)

a. Find the first three and most important, branches.
      Two should be on either side of the trunk but *not on the same level*
      One should be in the back
      Mark the branches in some way so you can readily find them (e.g. white twisty tie)
b. Repeat the process finding all the useful branches up to the top of the tree
    Mark them as well if there are lots of branches

4. Putting it all together

We have found three things:
    The best angle for the trunk base
    The best trunkline that shows taper
    The best branches alternating from side to side and in the back (depth)

a. Go back and look at your chosen angle for the base AND look at your chosen spot for the trunkline
    Do they agree?
        IF yes go to the next step
        IF Not you must:
            i.   choose between the two
            ii. or compromise by selecting a slighting modified angle
            iii. or find a new more pleasing base or trunkline
b. Once you have the base and trunkline complementing each other, mark this spot with both B & T.
      Looking from that angle find the first three branches selected; focus just on these branches for now AND start with branch #1.
         i.   Where is the branch in relation to the base? To the trunkline?
         ii. Going to the second branch – does it alternate sides with branch #1?
         iii. Do you still have a back branch?
      NOTE: Branch #2 OR #3 may be the back branch

      If they don't seem to be in the right positions can you slightly modify the angle again putting them in a better position?

      Or has everything just got very confusing?

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At this point you have two basic options, using what you have done so far:

5.A. **If you really like the base and trunkline angle** – it shows off the movement and taper of the tree – then try "discarding your choices" for branches.

- Keeping the tree at the chosen angle, look for any branches available at that angle.
- Also move the angle slightly to the right – look for branches
- Then move it back to start and then slightly to the left – look for branches, mark them as you go. If you have found alternate branches to use for your first three branches move on up the trunk selecting branches as you go.
- If you have been successful – review the overall look of your choices – if you don't like the outcome try using 2.

5.B. **If you really like the branches you have chosen** – they have good placement, distributed evenly, size is in proportion to the trunk – then try "discarding your choices" for base and trunkline.

- Keeping the tree angled so you put the 3 main branches in sight look to see how the base appears.
- Unless it looks narrow, is coming towards you or has an ugly scar, it should be "ok".
- Now follow up the line of the trunk to the top of the tree or to "a" top of the tree (alternate apex).
Unless the movement goes away from you, goes front to back instead of side to side or the trunk has a pronounced bulge (pigeon breast) in front it should be "ok".
- Mark the spot as the 'new' angle – review the overall look of the tree – if still not happy...

...When all else fails:

Before you do anything drastic, put the tree aside and come back to it another day with a fresh approach. Every time you go through the above process you learn a little more and learn "to see" trees in a new perspective.
And each time you try this it will get easier

If you have tried all the previous approaches and are still struggling with your decisions, the tree may just have too many flaws that are not easily rectified. If this is what you suspect ask for several opinions, obtaining multiple options to use.
Evaluate each carefully **but only choose an option that you like, that is pleasing to you**.
Remember it is your tree and what it looks like should be your choice.