

A Beginner Stepwise Styling Guide – Branch Development

The following is meant to serve as a basic guide for continuing the general styling process and working toward branch development and refinement. 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 most styles. However, styles like Broom, Windswept, and Literati, where branches are or can be the focus of the design, additional details will apply.

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, root-over-rock, cascade, forest, etc.).

1. Continue with the three main branches of the tree.

- a. The first branch “sets the fundamental structure for the style”.
 - i. Find the “branchline” following from the trunk out to the end of the branch.
 1. Is there a clear “line” to the apex of the branch?
 2. Is there taper?
 3. Does it repeat the “movement” of the trunk?
 4. Are they proportional to each other (first branch is the thickest, third branch is the thinnest)?
 5. Does it come off the trunk at the proper angle (outward, not down or up)?
 6. Does it appear healthy and actively growing (not visually weaker than the others)?

IF “yes” go to the next step.

IF multiple problems – are there other branches to choose from?

IF not – and this is the best choice –

The proportion can be dealt with by growing techniques;

If the angle is not too drastic wire *might* correct the direction;

But an un-healthy branch may be lost in the process and extra care will be needed.

- b. Look at each branch you have chosen and repeat the process above.
- c. Make your final choices for your branches. If you feel confident then prune the un-needed branches and seal your cut marks.

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2. Next look at/for the secondary branches on the main branch.

- a. Find your line to the apex of the branch again. Look at the placement of secondary branches and/or buds that you have available.
- b. If the plant produces alternating growth then the placement is straightforward as that is what you want for your structure
- c. IF the plant produces an opposite growth you will have to choose the branches to keep or prune to achieve an alternating pattern.
- d. Try to imagine a fishbone pattern with the spine as your main branch and your secondary branches as all the bones coming off the spine.
 - i. The branches closest to the trunk will be the longest
 - ii. The branches should get shorter as they get closer to the apex.
 - iii. The secondary branches should also have taper, a clear apex, and the same repeated movement.

The above refinement will take time and patience as you develop your tree and its branches.

3. The branches may need some direction or the secondary branches may need to be “flattened”.

Now may be the time to place some wire but use caution.

- a. Young branches grow quickly and have the biggest potential for developing wire cuts.
- b. The branch-crotch is another area that can “swell” quickly.
- c. The apex of the tree (and of a branch) has the biggest concentration of plant hormones and grows quickly – a wire too tight or in the wrong place can be disastrous to the point of losing the top of the tree.

Place wire carefully and check it often.

Enjoy growing your new bonsai.