

Bonsai Styling Series:

Multiple Trunks from a Single Root System

There are many variations, and combinations, to this style. The most common of these are:

1. Twin-trunk style (Sokan); two trunks joined together
2. **Clump or Sprout Style (Kabudachi); three or more odd numbers of trunks**
3. Stump or Turtle-back style (Korabuki); surface roots are bulged up
4. Straight line or Raft Style (Ikadabuki); single trunk growing along the ground, branches become new trunks
5. Sinuous Style or Raft from Root (Netsunagari); traveling surface roots with suckers

In the above styles multiple trunks are joined by a common root system.

Advantages:

There are several cultural and aesthetic advantages that apply when using this type of growing for multiple trunk styles.

- The planting will be easier to care for in regard to root pruning and repotting.
- The trees will grow at a uniform rate.
- They require the same conditions for growing.
- They will have identical leaf shape and size, color and texture. The bark texture will be the same.
- In autumn they will have the same color, developing at the same time.
- In spring the buds will develop at the same rate.

There are several species of trees and shrubs, or their cultivars, that naturally grow from a single root system and some are readily found in nurseries. Such as: birch, maple, boxwood, barberry, juniper, quince, azalea, Cotoneaster, Pyracantha, etc.

However sometimes, multiple seeds sprout together, or multiple seedlings are stuck together in the same growing container and as they grow they literally graft together and the root system becomes one.

Disadvantages:

As with everything there are always disadvantages but in regard to bonsai design they are manageable.

- There is little to no choice for positioning the trunks
- Adding depth to the design may be problematic

While you cannot “position” per se you can adjust with wire using direction and/or movement to achieve the appearance of a “different position”. The same would be true for depth with the simplest solution being “more back trunks”, if available, and wiring as a second option.

The most important point to remember, with all of the above styles, is that the ***overall design*** is what is most important in achieving a natural appearance. While this same concept is true for all bonsai designs it is critical to these styles, as well as for group and forest designs.

In brief: it is the relationship **between** the trees, how they are growing together and no ONE tree is *perfect* but it relies on the other trees to complete the ***total*** design.

And the latter concept gives us a big advantage for finding and choosing material for all the multiple trunk styles!

Clump Style

Japanese: KABUDACHI (ka-bu-DA-chee)

Clump style bonsai is characterized by having three or more odd numbers of trunks growing from a central point.

Design Aspects:

As in other multiple trunk styles:

- Each trunk should be visible and not crossing another trunk when viewed from the front.
- The top parts of the trunks are shaped to create variation in distances between the trunks.
- The tallest trunk should be the thickest
- The thinnest should be the shortest
- The heights are different
- The overall outline triangular and/or dome-like

Other Considerations:

A VERY important design aspect for this style is that it should be:

- **Asymmetrical**
- **NOT** fan-shaped
- And three-dimensional for depth.

For example, if you have only three trunks, the middle trunk should be the tallest or the shortest or it will look unnatural.

Approach:

Starting the Design – Evaluating the material/Choosing the Trunks

1. If you cannot see the base/trunks, because of sprouts and excess growth, clean out and remove unneeded growth.
2. Do NOT be concerned with height at this time, UNLESS there are VERY long shoots. Prune those back roughly to the general height of overall plant. (Final height is last.)
3. Locate the base and surface roots; expose by cleaning away the soil to the lateral roots (or at least the base of the trunks).
4. Most importantly, take your time, and observe all directions, rotating slowly, noticing all the trunks and how they are positioned in relationship with each other
 - a. Locate the dominant tree; or trees – there may be two clumps growing together
 - b. Locate the next two subordinate trees (lesser diameter) to the dominant tree(s)
 - c. If you have more ‘trunks’ keep going, noticing the relationship of the lesser trunks (or new suckers) to the main trees.
 - d. Notice the branching of the lesser trees: how low are they growing and are they growing to the outside, side or back. The smallest trees must have the lowest branches which will show lack of age.
5. If you have more than three trunks, choose the number of trunks you wish to keep. Keep in mind that with a naturally larger root system ‘sprouts/suckers’ are strong and will develop quickly.

To help you choose: The division of the trunks should be close to the base, and to be aesthetically pleasing, at acute angles.

Choosing the overall Triangle – Evaluating Trunk Position and Branches

1. Choose a front or fronts, mark for reference (e.g. chopstick, piece of wire, etc.)
2. At each reference point (and side as well) determine if:
 - a. each trunk is visible,
 - b. and is not crossing the line of another trunk (can you fix with wire?)
 - c. the distances between the trunks are varied.

However, the general direction and top parts of the trunks can be shaped to create the appearance of variations in distances (with wire).

3. Look at the overall branching; find the asymmetrical ‘triangle’ with the most pleasing shape and direction (right or left movement).
4. Find the smallest trunk(s) critical to this triangle and note the branches. They will most likely ‘supply’ all of the lowest and middle third branches.
5. **Now look at the dominant tree(s), it’s branching and its relationship to the other trunks. IT will contribute the upper 1/3 of the branches in the design:**
 - a. **You should ‘see’ the trunk’s movement and taper clearly**
 - b. **In the upper third you will need front branches**
 - c. **Most importantly it will contribute the most to the crown (front, back and side views)**
 - d. **And to some degree, the movement of the composition, which can be subtle or dramatic. This will be dependent on:**
 - i. **Its location within the composition and**
 - ii. **how many total trees you have.**
6. **Remove the unneeded branches.**
7. **Repeat evaluation and removal down to the smallest trees including from the side view. Remember, back branches (mid third, dominant) create depth:**
 - a. **If there are only three trunks the ‘tree behind’ the others will create depth with its back branches. If it is also the smallest tree it will have the lowest branch.**
 - b. **If more than three trunks then there could be several creating depth with back branches and position would be determined by trunk size.**
 - c. **All trunks will technically have back branches if they are contributing to the crown.**

Refining the Movement of the Composition – Length and Height

Look at your chosen triangle again:

- decide branch length creating a **layering effect** (sides of the triangle),
- the **width** of the composition
- And its **depth**.

Now using your triangle once again decide the final height of your clump:

- Use the available branches you have for a crown and taper as a guide.

BEFORE shortening:

- Look at your smallest trees and imagine how short they must be to proportionally compliment the tallest tree.

If you have doubts, start with the smallest trees first and work your way to the tallest tree and then do minor adjustments.

IF you find that your tallest tree, after this last trimming, seems a little too tall because the crown is ‘thin’, don’t worry it will fill in with time.

Some light wiring will help distribute the branching you have, giving it a fuller look.

Remember bonsai is a process, the style developing character and maturity with time.

Pots:

The pot style can be oval or rectangular and shallow, or else round, square, hexagonal or any shape with sides of equal length and shallow or medium in depth.

Glazed pots used with flowering or fruiting would contrast the color of the glaze with the color of the attribute you want to emphasize. For deciduous it would contrast with the fall color.

NEVER match the color.

Creating Clumps:

1. **Clump styles may be collected from nature** – a clump of seedlings that sprouted at the same time and growing together (Yamayori or Yamayose)
2. **artificially produced** by cutting back a trunk severely producing suckers, or
3. **by air-layering** a section of a tree that has a whorl or multiple branches at the same junction.
4. **It can also be created by planting** some trees very close together and binding them at the base. As they grow their roots will entwine and the trunk bases fuse together.

References:

J. Y. Naka; Bonsai Techniques I, 1985

D. R. Koreshoff; Bonsai: Its Art, Science, History and Philosophy, 1984

