

Kusamono Bonsai

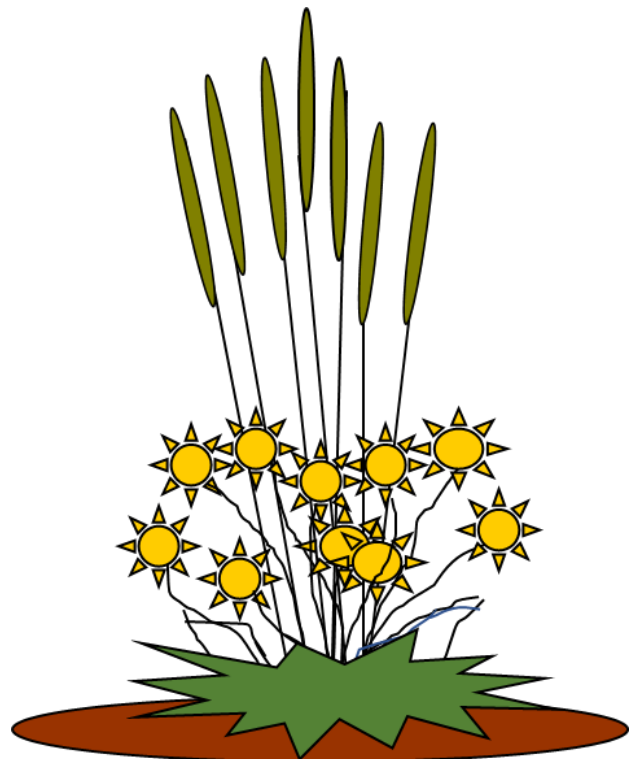
Another way to have fun with plants

Most everyone is familiar with Accent plants and their use in an exhibit to denote scale and season as they sit next to a bonsai tree. The many and various species used become a curious addition to our exhibit visitors as these plants are most often seen in backyards and gardens and not in small bonsai pots. This is especially true with the miniature Hostas.

Another way to use these plants is as Kusamono Bonsai or small to large mixed plantings which can have multiple species, and even families in one pot. The name, *Kusamono*, is a NEW Japanese term as it is only 150 years old and quite a contrast to *bonsai*. Around that time, and as bonsai were being collected from the wild, mountain grasses growing with or in close proximity to the trees were also collected and put into pots. *Translated, it means Grass-Thing.*

Over time, small flowering plants were also dug together and planted in pots. These were very natural and subdued plantings representing the original environment of the trees. They were a “natural plant combination from nature” AND a *natural* design as well: an upper area of grasses for height, a middle area of small flowering plants for interest and a lower area for mosses or lichen. So, when creating *Kusamono*, planting material with varying heights will create a more interesting and artistic arrangement in a pot and displayed on a base. (below)

- **Upper area for grasses**
- **Middle area for smaller plants that also may flower**
- **Lower area for mosses and lichens.**
- **A “Design” example found in nature!**
- **And when displayed: a simple, flat [wood] base!**



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Just like assembling a grove you always start with the tallest material. But be careful—many times what you are buying at the nursery is not at its full height. So, again, read the tag and plant accordingly. It may not “look right” at first but as the plants become established, they will look fine.

When choosing plants, perennials are the best if you want a display that will last for years. Others can be used of course if it's just for a season, or you can tuck them into a perennial planting during the year for a flower or color emphasis.

From an aesthetics perspective choose plants for their *interest*. Leaves and flowers: color, size, shape and texture. *When* does it flower, is there a season you want to emphasize? If there are berries: color, size, shape. And if there will be seeds: prominent, colorful, etc.

Create a Focal Point: use dominance of one species in a group composition and think of the “other species” as accents to the main species. However, beware of making your planting TOO BUSY! Like most aesthetics in bonsai, it is best to keep it “simple”. This is especially true if using wild plants. Stick to simple flowers, no double petals, simple (subdued) colors.

For formal display, and the overall emphasis of the planting, you can use two approaches...group plants to define the season, a more traditional approach OR group plants to express multiple seasons during the year...a more contemporary approach. An example would be flowering plants that flower at different times.

Another point in design includes the type of container you will use. Pots of any kind are ok, but if the pot is glazed it is best to have a matt surface not glossy. Rock slabs and dishes are a favorite or pots that are very rustic looking, almost on the crude side. While you might be tempted, keep it simple so the finished planting looks very close to a scene in nature.

Another popular type of planting is using muck that has had soil and sand added and planting the plants directly into the mixture after washing off the roots. This is formed into a mound and wired onto a round piece of bonsai screen. The entire planting is then covered with moss which holds it together while the roots become established. This type of planting can be displayed on a tile, suiban, tray, or rock slab and is called *Nearai*. Similar to this, as the roots become a very dense stable mesh, the plant can simply be lifted out of the pot and set on a suitable tray.

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To maintain your planting, adjust the design as it “grows”. Don’t overthink it. Perennials will naturally move around in the pot, just like they do in your garden. If it gets really unruly, THEN it might be time to do something more drastic. In the meantime:

- Use scissors/tweezers to adjust
- Control the stronger, faster growers if multiple species
- Trim to maintain a [volume] balance
- Create a flow [just like bonsai] – does it move right or left?

Horticulturally, just choosing perennials will not guarantee your planting will last. The most **important point** is that all the included plants must be ‘**compatible**’ regarding their growth habits- “likes and dislikes”:

1. Sun exposure
2. Moisture
3. Soil
4. Fertilizer
5. Protection

Most of the above will be found on the tags. If you’re collecting from the wild, look for similarities where they grow!

The required sun exposure is critical for blooming, size of leaves and plant height, and lifespan. They all must *like* the same amount of sun exposure to thrive. From full sun to full shade and everything in-between, matching up the requirements for each plant is very important. For example, if you use a Hosta that requires shade all the other plants you choose must also require shade.

The same is true regarding moisture requirements. Plants cannot live without the correct amount of water; they have root systems adapted to *their* normal availability requirements. And using the same *type* of plant is not always sufficient. For example, there are many grasses that range from wetlands to high sierra. So, when you buy your plants make sure the pot has a tag that describes the culture requirements, or at least the botanical name.

The best soil mixes have properties similar to the plant’s “natural habitat” regarding moisture and drainage. Again, use the tag or do some research.

Regarding repotting it is basically “hands-off”. Most are repotted infrequently, if

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at all. For example: Reeds and grasses; every 10 years. Sometimes “repotting” is used to add or subtract plants and not changing the soil and many bloom better if a bit root bound.

A balanced fertilizer is the best choice. Choose one that has mixing or application instructions for *potted plants*. Use the “fertilizer rule”: less and more often is better!

And lastly, protection through the year is dictated by your plants. Some may need sun exposure adjustment when its hot and others may need some winter protection: do your research so you are not disappointed!

Have some fun, do some plant hunting and let your imagination run wild!

References:

Bonsai, Kusamono , Suiseki:

*A Practical Guide for Organizing Displays with Plants and Stones,
by Willi Benz (Germany, 2002)*

Four Seasons of Bonsai by Kyuzo Murata (Japan, 1991)

And a few pictures for inspiration:

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Miniature Rose, violet and moss; open dish on wood base



Multiple grasses, mosses and lichen on a granite slab



Dwarf Hydrangea with violets and moss, Nearai planting

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Dwarf columbine, Bear's grapes and black mondo; Nearai planting on a ceramic glazed dish



Rush (*Juncus ensifolius*)

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Creeping Saxifrage and moss planted on a rock



Black Mondo and multiple fern species with moss in a handmade shell tray



Lily of the Valley, late April – lifted out of its pot and show on a Suiban (20 yrs.)