

Banyan Fig

GUIDELINES FOR CREATING THE BANYAN STYLE

Banyans rank among nature's most unusual and distinctive trees. In their native ranges, these tropical figs can grow 22m tall by 42 wide, and develop canopies many times that wide. There are Banyans in India that stretch across acres and are considered sacred places by local residents.

Banyans can attain such amazing size because of their habit of sending down aerial roots from the trunk and branches. In time, these roots become trunks themselves, and the tree continues to grow outward like a spider's web.

Just as the rules for classical styles of bonsai are derived from observing other trees in nature, the rules for banyan bonsai are derived from observing tropical figs in nature. Rather than being defined by the angle of the trunk, the Banyan is defined by its silhouette: a single, heavy trunk with a broad, low spreading crown and aerial roots descending from the branches.

Creating a bonsai that effectively evokes the imposing image of a Banyan raises some unique challenges

for the artist and requires some unusual approaches.

SPECIES

In nature, the most famous Banyan is the *Ficus religiosa* or Bo tree (the tree under which Buddha found enlightenment), but it is not usually used for bonsai because of its large leaves. [There is a Banyan fig in India that is over 230 years old 40 m height with a spread of 22 165 m2 being held up with 2800 props.](#)



Ficus microcarpa is a much better tree for the Banyan style because of its small leaves and compact growth habit. There are several varieties, and most of them are susceptible to Thrips – a tiny black flying insect that causes the leaves to curl. Thrips damage can be easily controlled with insecticides or by removing the infested leaves when you see them.

Ficus microcarpa retusa 'Nitida' also produces an abundance of aerial roots. It is also more susceptible to Thrips than other varieties.

Ficus benjamina, also called the Weeping Fig, is a problem as the leaves constantly hang, looking like the tree needs water. It can stand mild frost.

Wiring often causes die back.

Fig grows quickly

Beware of cross species grafts where *benjamina* branches are grafted to *microcarpa* root stock. Should a branch die you will need to regraft as the emerging branches and leaves will grow differently.

STYLING

Because Banyans are so unique, many of the rules for classical, Japanese-style bonsai do not apply. This is a free style tree and lends itself more to the Chinese Penjing styles.

The canopy spread from side to side should be slightly longer than from front to back. The foliage should

start at one-third the height of the tree. These ratios can be adjusted somewhat to suit the individual tree.

When choosing a plant for this style, look for a thick trunk with strong surface roots and low branches. Strong aerial roots may cause reverse taper or apical branches to become thicker than lower branches.

Start by finding the front of the tree. Look at the exposed surface roots and the aerial roots, then consider

the branches -- remember that branches can be moved, even large ones. If a large branch cannot be moved

with wire alone, make a cut next to the trunk on the opposite side of the direction you want to move the



branch and break it. It is necessary to wire it in the usual manner so that it can heal in the position you want.

Determine the height of the finished tree by assessing the character of the trunk and the placement of the

lowest branches.

Shorten the trunk and all the branches to make the silhouette conform to the ratio of two to one, width to height.

Remove all the branches that are too large for their position on the tree. The lowest branches should be the thickest. The higher the branch, the thinner it should be. Crossing branches and those that grow straight up or down should be removed.

When shortening a branch, cut it back to a side branch that can be wired out to create a new terminal. Wire any remaining branches as needed.

Tropical bonsai should look lush. With Ficus, you can defoliate twice a year to help rapidly build a finely ramified canopy. Keep the separation between foliage pads tight, and sculpt them individually, to give the canopy the look of a billowing cloud.

AERIAL AND GROUND ROOTS

The roots are a key feature of Banyan bonsai. Surface roots should be natural looking. Remove any roots that are too large or are crossing, although crossing roots can be very attractive if they are so prolific that they appear as a fused mass. It is sometimes necessary to split a root that is too large in order to make it conform to the scale of the other roots. Roots of the Ficus can be drastically modified to help give a natural appearance.

Aerial roots really define the Banyan style. In nature, they grow only when the humidity is uncomfortably high and the air is still. But you can help stimulate the production of aerial roots on raw stock by wrapping the trunk in plastic to create a more humid microclimate, and putting the tree aside where it won't be disturbed. Make sure to keep it moist.

Aerial roots should look natural and be balanced from side to side in a relatively even pattern around the trunk. They should be as vertical as possible, and the branches that host them should be close to horizontal. If a good aerial root is growing at an angle, dig out the base and straighten it, planting it more deeply to take up the extra length. Remove or split any large roots that are not in proportion to the size of the bonsai. Although these aerial roots are essentially secondary trunks, they should always be in scale with the diameter of the main trunk. If a well-placed aerial becomes too thick, carve it down until it is the proper diameter.

A new aerial root that is just starting to grow can be trained by using a soda straw to direct it into the precise spot desired. It is important to split the straw along its entire length before use so that it will be easy to remove when the root has attached itself to the ground. It's best to use straws after the tree has been placed in its bonsai pot.

POTTING

When choosing a pot for the Banyan style, the usual rules do not apply. This style looks better in a very shallow tray or slab that shows off the surface and aerial roots.

Since Ficus can tolerate drastic root pruning, it is possible to use very shallow pots and slabs.

The best time to pot is spring, but your climate may allow it at other times.

To encourage the development of a nice flare at the base of the trunk and powerful roots, we plant our prebonsai stock deeply. When it's time to style the tree, we wash away the upper soil to expose the surface roots and then cut the remaining root ball so that only the surface roots remain. If you are working with a large tree, a chain saw can be used to remove the root ball. The tree can then be planted in a shallow pot or slab in the usual manner.