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Sei-kei

A couple of years ago a gentleman emailed me asking me to do an article on Sei-kei, or landscape plantings. Soon afterwards I accidentally trashed his email and was unable to answer him. This article is for him, and of course anybody else who is interested.

While group and forest plantings generally consist of trees of the same species, and are normally arranged to some prescribed pattern eg, 2 groups of 3 and 5 trees with one dominant tree, landscape scenes are almost free of layout prescriptions. Anything goes. A bonsai landscape created by a master is truly a work of art, providing a myriad of textures, shapes and colours that keep the viewer fascinated for ages. Any number of additional props like rocks, miniature statues and figurines can be combined with miniature trees, individually or in groups, bamboos, grass and moss to create a landscape of never-ending enchantment. A world in a teacup.

The obvious goal is to represent a landscape scene, immediately suggesting that an illusion of distance is a key feature. Placing a small figurine of an old man fishing under or near a tree will make the tree appear larger than it is. A large tree positioned close to the side of a container will make the eye move from the tree to the empty (negative) space. This negative space suggests an open meadow, especially when covered with moss (grass). The illusion of distance will be increased if one places a much smaller tree at the far end. A large (and well chosen) rock, with one or more tiny cascade bonsai, a small maiden-hair fern and some moss would make a lovely scene.

As in the group or forest plantings ready-made trays, and irregular pieces of slate are commonly used, but one can quite easily make a custom-shaped container from chicken-wire and quick-drying (fondue) cement or fiberglass. This method has the advantage of enabling one to construct imitation rocks and purchase points for the trees exactly as one requires. Imitation rocks are also a lot lighter than real ones. Some enthusiasts really go to town, and build in hidden water pipes and fish-tank pumps to get that real mountain stream effect. Sheets of glass over clouded sand are also used to represent water, but are most effective if used over a large area as if representing the sea. Don't bury little bits of glass in a hillside in an attempt to make a stream, that's just ugly.

Planning your landscape is a lot of work, and a lot of fun. Be prepared to spend a lot of time on the preparation. Position your plants and props in your container beforehand trying any and every probable arrangement. Rocks can be glued to the bottom of the container using silicon sealant, available from any supermarket or hardware store. You may also want to drill holes for drainage (not necessary for flat surfaces like slate), or to insert wires to support trees or props.

I would use finer soil with slower drainage for a landscape because keeping them constantly moist is quite difficult. Finer richer soil also helps to hold roots onto rocks and can be used almost like clay to paste the roots down.

? It is not how old it is that matters, it's how old it appears to be? is an old bonsai phrase and is just as relevant when it comes to sei-kei. Don't plant rocks on the surface as if they had just been laid by a chicken. Bury them below the surface with just their tips poking out, as if the wind has blown soil up against them for centuries. Plastic figurines and statues should be discoloured and weathered. Paint them with yoghurt and leave them in a cool damp place for a few weeks. The yoghurt encourages moss to form, I kid you not! Another way of encouraging moss to grow on rocks is to find a supply of moss, scrape some off and dry it by placing it in the sun on a saucer. Then simply rub the powdered moss on the rock, leave it in a damp place and keep it moist. Don't roll the stone because as you well know, rolling stones don't gather moss.

Although free of many of the styling rules applied to standard bonsai, each of the elements in a sei-kei need to be styled and positioned with the same ? eye for design? as one would use in working with bonsai, the big old fig tree at the end of the orchard still needs correct branch placement, leaf and occasionally root trimming. Your choice of props is critical because it is very easy to create something really citch. Too many Greek columns is not cool unless one is doing a Greek ruins landscape, in which case one would definitely include a few olive bonsai.