



A guide to Judging bonsai for judges

Bonsai Guidance Handbook #2

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1. Introduction

The UK Bonsai Association was established on the 21st of October 2018 as an umbrella association bringing together all aspects of UK Bonsai. As a non-profit association, our purpose is to promote knowledge and interest in all aspects of bonsai and to connect the whole UK bonsai community.

We publish the UKBA monthly bulletin, which enables us to fulfil our main criteria of communicating all information about UK bonsai events directly to all bonsai enthusiasts. The administrators and helpers of the UKBA are volunteers who are dedicated to spreading the word about all aspects of bonsai within the UK and also promoting UK bonsai abroad.

The UK Bonsai Association is open to all individuals free of charge, we invite you to join us.

For many years now there has been lots of discussion over the criteria for judging bonsai at all the different levels of shows within the UK amongst both exhibitors and judges. There has always been a view held that a more formalised approach is required to create a consistent, transparent, fair and repeatable process for the judging of bonsai in the UK and with the help of these criteria it would improve the overall standard of bonsai within the UK and encourage the continued development of bonsai trees to higher standards.

The guidance set out in this handbook is intended for use across all levels of those within the hobby of bonsai from the beginner through to the experienced bonsai artist to help provide constructive development guidance as well as the types of criteria that bonsai trees are judged against. There is no one set of criteria appropriate for judging all bonsai and the method or approach for judging may need to be selected from a range of options presented within this handbook depending on the level of competition, show or event being held and the format of the classes or entries.

This handbook has been compiled following discussions with many bonsai artists, judges and enthusiasts across all levels of bonsai and seeks to provide options as opposed to one specific set of rules.

2. Notes for judges

When being engaged as a judge for a bonsai show, the judge should ascertain that it is of a size that can be judged within a reasonable time.

As a general rule, it is recommended that bonsai shows have more than one judge to ensure a balanced and fair approach to the judging due to the artistic and aesthetic nature of bonsai in addition to the scientific and technical features of bonsai trees.

All judges should arrive in good time for the start of a show and the judging and inform the show manager or show secretary of their arrival but remain away from the staging of the bonsai trees and bonsai displays until they are due to judge.

It may be helpful at the start of judging for the judges to glance over all the bonsai exhibits in order to get an idea of the task ahead.

The judge's stewards should be made aware of the stewarding duties and ensure that they understand the judging system and the judges method of marks or comments on the judging sheets.

As the judges proceed, it is useful if the judges highlight any additional bonsai trees or bonsai displays for consideration for higher awards eg Best accent, Best overall display, and Best Club display as they go around to save time later.

General guidelines for your judges

- Each judge will be given a set of result sheets on which to record their votes, and each Judge will personally sign their sheets
- all individual trees will be numbered.
- the shohin/mame display will have one number as these are usually judged as a whole display as opposed to individual bonsai trees

- each judge must judge the bonsai trees and bonsai displays as per the agreed method of judging following the system set out in the rules and showing schedule
- each judge is invited to comment on the judging forms, the bonsai displays and individual bonsai trees and this is useful feedback to those who have entered the competition
- **all judged completed sheets should be handed back to the Show Stewards when completed.**
- **they will then aggregate all the points or votes per award and will then list all the winners on a separate results sheet.**
- if the aggregated results indicate a tie between two or more displays/ trees then the Overall judge and Head Judge will be subsequently asked to select the winner.
- the award notification cards and trophies will be set out as soon as possible by each winning bonsai tree or bonsai display
- NB The results sheets will be posted in the hall for all to see.

Conduct of Judges at Shows

- The objectivity of a judge should never have to be questioned and act with integrity at all times
- a judge must be well informed with show regulations as well as the current bonsai, horticultural and arboricultural standards and classification for the classes they are judging at the show
- they shall strive to have correct behaviour and good manners
- they shall judge in an established way with reassuring and convincing manners, giving all exhibits equal time and effort
- a judge cannot before the show stay the night at a person's house who has entered the show
- a judge cannot read the show catalogue before or during the judging
- a judge shall be appropriately dressed for the appointment
- a judge cannot have a bonsai tree or display within the classes they are judging
- a judge shall always treat colleagues politely and with respect. Even if the judge disagrees with their fellow judges, they must not speak depreciatingly of them
- a judge shall not interfere with any of the bonsai exhibits or displays at anytime
- a judge shall look at all the bonsai displays without touching the displays
- a judge shall remain fair and balanced at all times in their views and comments provided whilst in the role of judge

Disqualification

Entries can only be disqualified if they fail to conform to the bonsai show schedule and rules set out from the outset. The judges decision is final though.

Examples of grounds for disqualification include:

- bonsai trees entered into the wrong class for the tree species
- bonsai tree infected with pests or disease
- bonsai tree is the incorrect size for the class

3. Different types of bonsai classes

There are a range of different classes at bonsai shows and each show will have a specific set, these should be identified in a show schedule with their criteria for each class. Here are a set of the typical bonsai classes that are used at the bonsai shows in the UK.

Table 1: Typical bonsai classes in the UK

Class type	Description	Notes
Evergreen	The bonsai tree must be an evergreen tree species to qualify for this class.	A tree or shrub that bears live foliage all year round. The list of species for the show would be determined by the show schedule.
Deciduous	The bonsai tree must be a deciduous tree species that is also a broadleaf tree (as opposed to a deciduous conifer) to qualify for this class.	A tree or shrub that loses their leaves or foliage and becomes dormant during the winter in the UK. The list of species for the show would be determined by the show schedule.
Conifer	The bonsai tree species must be that of a coniferous tree species and can include a deciduous conifer to qualify for this class.	A tree that is cone-bearing or within the subset of gymnosperms.
Tropical tree	Tropical species of tree to qualify for this class.	This in the UK would be a tree species that is non native and from a tropical or sub tropical region of the world. The list of tropical tree species for the show would be determined by the show schedule. Need to set criteria from the suggested criteria for this class in advance if this is a class in a show to ensure everyone is aware of the species that fits this category.
Chuhin	The bonsai tree must fit within this size category for Chuhin.	Need to set the size criteria to be able to determine all the trees within this size class first.
Shohin display	Shohin display of shohin sized trees usually part of a wider 3, 5 or 7 point display.	Need to set the size criteria to be able to determine all the trees within this size class first as to what is shohin.
Mame display	Mame display of all bonsai trees that fall within the height criteria for Mame and usually in 3, 5, or 7 point displays	Need to set the size criteria to be able to determine all the trees within this size class first as to what is shohin.
Native	UK Native tree species only to qualify for this class	See the list of Native species in Table 3 for the UK.
Best tree species classification	See the tree classification family groups	
Club display	Collection of bonsai trees owned and displayed by members of a bonsai club.	

4. Different types of bonsai awards

Based on the typical bonsai classes, here are the types of awards that can be won from entering those classes and what the likely criteria for awarding them might be.

Table 2: Examples of bonsai awards

Examples of Award types	Description	Notes
Best in Show	This is an award that goes to the highest scoring tree overall across all classes within a show	Prestigious award, highest level to be awarded at a show. One tree can win more than one category including this award but only one tree can be awarded Best in Show.
Best Evergreen	This can only be awarded to an Evergreen tree species and one that scores the highest points within a show.	See the list of Evergreen trees in the Show Schedule.
Best Deciduous	This can only be awarded to a deciduous tree species that is also a broadleaf tree (as opposed to a deciduous conifer) and one that scores the highest points within a show.	See the list of Deciduous trees in the Show Schedule.
Best Conifer	This can only be awarded to a Coniferous tree species and can include a deciduous conifer and one that scores the highest points within a show.	See the list of Coniferous trees in the Show Schedule.
Best tree/pot combination	This is to be awarded to the tree with the most points for the tree/ pot combination.	
Best Chuhin	Based purely on the best tree within this size category.	Need to set the size criteria to be able to determine all the trees within this size class first.
Best Tropical tree	Awarded to the best species of tree that is a tree species from a tropical origin.	Need to set criteria from the suggested criteria for this class in advance if this is a class in a show to ensure everyone is aware of the species that fits this category. See the list of tropical trees in the Show Schedule.
Best Shohin display	This is for the whole Shohin display as shohin are rarely shown as individual trees and usually part of a wider 3, 5 or 7 point display.	Need to set the size criteria to be able to determine all the trees within this size class first as to what is shohin.
Best Shohin tree	Based purely on the best tree within this size category.	Need to set the size criteria to be able to determine all the trees within this size class first.
Best Mame	This is for the whole Mame display as Mame are rarely shown as individual trees and usually part of a wider 3, 5 or 7 point display.	Need to set the size criteria to be able to determine all the trees within this size class first as to what is shohin.
Best Mame tree	Based purely on the best tree within this size category.	Need to set the size criteria to be able to determine all the trees within this size class first.

Examples of Award types	Description	Notes
Best Native	Awarded to the native tree with the highest score.	See the list of Native species in Table 3 for the UK.
Best tokanoma / Overall display	Awarded to the best single tree display usually based around the stand, scroll, accent and single tree with the highest points regardless of species but for Bonsai size class and above.	
Best tree species classification	See the tree classification family groups	
Best Club display	To be awarded to the best overall club display	
Best Accent	To be awarded to the best accent regardless of the bonsai tree and display	
RHS Award Banksian Medal	RHS Award to the overall Show winner	Can only be awarded to the Best tree overall in the Show

5. Native trees of the UK schedule

Here is the list of the UK native tree species that are eligible to be entered into a Native Tree Class

Table 3: Native trees in the UK

Common Name	Latin Name
Field Maple	Acer campestre
Alder	Alnus glutinosa
Strawberry tree	Arbutus unedo
Silver Birch	Betula pendula
Downy Birch	Betula pubescens
Common Box	Buxus sempervirens
Hornbeam	Carpinus betulus
Dogwood	Cornus sanguinea
Hazel	Corylus avellana
Midland Hawthorn	Crataegus laevigata
Hawthorn	Crataegus monogyna
Spindle	Euonymus europaea
Common Beech	Fagus sylvatica
Ash	Fraxinus excelsior
Sea Buckthorn	Hippophae rhamnoides
Holly	Ilex aquifolium
Juniper	Juniperus communis
Common Privet	Ligustrum vulgare
Honeysuckle	Lonicera perclymenum
Crab apple	Malus sylvestris
Scots Pine	Pinus sylvestris
Black Poplar	Populus nigra subsp. Betulifolia
Aspen	Populus tremula
<u>Wild Cherry</u>	Prunus avium

Table 3 continued: Native trees in the UK

Common Name	Latin Name
Bird Cherry	<i>Prunus padus</i>
Blackthorn	<i>Prunus spinosa</i>
Plymouth Pear	<i>Pyrus cordata</i>
Sessile Oak	<i>Quercus petraea</i>
English Oak	<i>Quercus robur</i>
Purging Buckthorn	<i>Rhamnus cathartica</i>
Alder Buckthorn	<i>Rhamnus frangula</i>
Eared Willow	<i>Salix aurita</i>
Goat Willow	<i>Salix caprea</i>
Grey Willow	<i>Salix cinerea</i> subsp. <i>oleifolia</i>
Purple Willow	<i>Salix purpurea</i>
Elder	<i>Sambucus nigra</i>
Whitebeam	<i>Sorbus aria</i>
Rowan	<i>Sorbus aucuparia</i>
Service tree	<i>Sorbus domestica</i>
Rock Whitebeam	<i>Sorbus rupicola</i>
Wild Service tree	<i>Sorbus torminalis</i>
Yew	<i>Taxus baccata</i>
Small leaved Lime	<i>Tilia cordata</i>
Large leaved Lime	<i>Tilia platyphyllos</i>
Wych Elm	<i>Ulmus glabra</i>
English Elm	<i>Ulmus procera</i>
Wayfaring tree	<i>Viburnum lantana</i>
Guelder Rose	<i>Viburnum opulus</i>

6. Bonsai tree sizes

The size of bonsai in the UK is not standardised currently but as a general rule the majority of shows set out their own dimensions and classifications within their show schedule. Table 4 provides a guide to approximate bonsai size classification.

Table 4: Example of Bonsai size classification in the UK

Bonsai size Classification UK	Scale	Ranges	Height
Mame	Very small	Keshi	Up to 2.5cm or <1 inch
		Shito	7.5cm or <3 inches
		Mame	15cm or <6 inches
Shohin	Small	Komono	Up to 18cm
		Gafu	13cm to 20cm or <8 inches
		Myabi	15cm to 25cm
Kifu	Medium	Katade-mochi	Up to 40cm
		Chuhin	40cm to 60cm
Daiza	Large	Omono	80cm to 120cm
		Bonju	100cm to 150cm
		Imperial	Up to 200cm

Within the UK and World Wide there isn't a general measurement, it does vary depending on the show and area of the World.

Here are some examples from the major bonsai shows in the UK as a guide.

Table 5: UK Bonsai Show size guides

Size class	Doncaster	EXPO UK	Telford	Swindon
Mini (Mame)	0 - 12cm (0 - 5")	0 - 10cm (0 - 4")	0 - 12cm (0 - 5")	0 - 10 (0 - 4")
Small (Shohin)	12 - 25cm (5 - 10")	10 - 20cm (4 - 8")	12 - 20cm (5 - 8")	12 - 20cm (4 - 8")
Medium (Chuhin)	25 - 50cm (10 - 20")	20 - 40cm (8 - 16")	20 - 40cm (8 - 16")	25 - 35cm (10 - 14")
Large	50cm + (20"+)	40cm + (16"+)	40cm + (16"+)	45cm + (18"+)

The size of your bonsai is only a significant factor when it comes to shows, as it will need to be the correct size for the class it is being entered into. Scale and proportion are more important than actual tape measure sizes though, it should be about the final image but for shows it needs to conform to the show rules.

7. Labelling

Labelling of entries for bonsai shows is desirable but it is not always obligatory at all shows or for all exhibitions. It is a useful method for education if the aim of the exhibition or display is to further knowledge to have each tree species clearly identified. However, judges should check labels are correctly spelt and provide accurate information to avoid any misinformation.

Tree Name: The tree's botanical Latin name should consist of genus and species, and where relevant, sub-species, variety and cultivar name. Whereas common names vary from country to country, and even region to region, proper botanical Latin naming ensures the correct identification of trees around the world.

- the genus name always has a capital first letter and is written first and italicised or underlined.
- the species or specific epithet is in lower case and italicised or underlined and follows the genus.
- the scientific names of trees in full is italicised or underlined and made up of the genus, species and cultivar if known.

Common Name: where there is a common English name in use, this appears in addition underneath the botanical Latin name. Where a tree has both a cultivar name and a common name only the cultivar name is shown due to limited space.

8. Judging Examples

Example 1

- Each judge will have three equal votes to allocate per award category. All of the three votes must be allocated and recorded on the judging sheet. Judges **can not** vote for their own trees
- NB Each vote is of equal importance i.e. no first, second or third place vote, so the order in which votes are recorded is irrelevant. systems

Example form

Class	1st	2nd	3rd
Best in Show			
Best Evergreen			
Best Deciduous			
Best Conifer			
Best tree/pot combination			
Best Chuhin			
Best Shohin display			
Best Mame display			
Best accent			
Best Club display			

Example 2: The Points System

Award the point for each element from within the description ranges

Tree No.		Species	
Criteria to judge	Max score	Score	Comments
Trunk	7		
Nebari	7		
Branches	7		
Foliage	7		
Pot/Container	7		
Presentation	12		
Overall Impression	12		
Total marks	59		

Example 3: The Points System

Award points from 1-5 for each element then add up the totals

Tree No.		Species	
Criteria to judge	Max score	Score	Comments
Roots	5		
Trunk	5		
Branches	5		
Foliage	5		
Pot/Container	5		
Surface treatment	5		
Overall Impression	5		
Total marks	35		

Example 4: Deducting Points System

Start out with maximum points and deduct a point for each fault

Tree No.		Species	
Criteria to judge	Max score	Score	Comments
The health of the tree	20		
Pot	10		
Preparation of tree	20		
Display	20		
Overall Impression of Exhibit	30		
Total Marks	100		

Example 5: Judging in depth per tree with points

Tree No.		Species	
Criteria to judge	Max score	Score	Comments
General condition & health of bonsai tree	10		
Maturity	5		
Freedom from pests & diseases	5		
Origin & difficulty of cultivation	5		
Rarity	3		
Presentation	10		
Bonsai pot & cultural medium	5		
Bonsai stand / tokanoma	5		
Overall form	10		
Roots / Nebari	10		
Trunk	10		
Branches & crown	10		
Style	10		
Flowering or fruiting bonsai	2		
Total Marks	100		

Example 6: Judging in depth per tree with points

All bonsai trees start with a score of 0 and have to build up points based on the maximum points for each element

Tree No.		Species	
Elements to consider	Max Score	Score	Comments
Health			
Pests/ Diseases	5		
Foliage / Flowers / Fruit	5		
Wiring			
Technique	5		
Wire scars	5		
Trunk / Nebari			
Soil - tree transition	5		
Bark	5		
Taper	5		
Branches			
Placement	5		
Ramification	5		
Character	5		
Potting			
Placement in pot arrangement	5		
Suitability of pot	5		
Soil level and surface treatment	5		
Overall design and presentation			
Suitability for Species	5		
Apex	5		
Silhouette	5		
Impression of age	5		
Naturalness	5		
Impact/feeling	5		
Refinement of Presentation	5		
Total Score	100		

Example 7: The Reducing System

All bonsai tree start with 100 points and points are deducted against the maximum score for any defects

Tree No.		Species	
Elements to consider	Deducting Score	Score	Comments
Health			
Pests/ Diseases	5		
Foliage / Flowers / Fruit	5		
Wiring			
Technique	5		
Wire scars	5		
Trunk / Nebari			
Soil - tree transition	5		
Bark	5		
Taper	5		
Branches			
Placement	5		
Ramification	5		
Character	5		
Potting			
Placement in pot arrangement	5		
Suitability of pot	5		
Soil level and surface treatment	5		
Overall design and presentation			
Suitability for Species	5		
Apex	5		
Silhouette	5		
Impression of age	5		
Naturalness	5		
Impact/feeling	5		
Refinement of Presentation	5		
Total Score	100		

Example 8: The Public Vote

Ask the general public for their choice of their top 3 favourite bonsai trees and a comment

Tree Number	1st Favourite	2nd Favourite	3rd Favourite
Comments	1st Favourite	2nd Favourite	3rd Favourite

Example 9: Select the Best top three

Selection of the top 3 bonsai trees regardless of class or category

Tree Species	Tree Number	Tree Species
1st choice		
2nd choice		
3rd Choice		

Example 10: Judging bonsai displays

Awarded marks based on Excellent (4), Very Good (3), Good (2), Poor (1) and Unsatisfactory (0)

Ambition	4
Overall Impression	4
Design	4
Construction	4
Planting	4
Total	20

Tree No.		Tree Species				
		Gold	Silver	Bronze		
Points		Excellent	Very Good	Good	Poor	Unsatisfactory
Criteria	Description	4	3	2	1	0
Ambition	how original is the design? Is there theatre, flair, atmosphere and impact?					
Overall Impression	Does the display work as a whole? How fine is the finish and attention to detail?					
Design	Does the display work for its supposed purpose?					
Construction	How good is the quality of the build?					
Planting	Think colour, impact, composition, health?					

Example 11: Simplified Judging multiple trees

Tree Number	Overall impression out of 20	Technique out of 10	Total score	Comments	Award winners
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					
17					
18					
19					
20					
21					
22					
23					
24					
25					
26					
27					
28					
29					
30					

Example 12: Complex system of judging per tree

Start with max score and deduct points for each fault under each section		
Score	Max score to start = 20	Deduct 3 points for each item at fault but score 0 if Pest or disease present
Health of tree	Pest free & disease free	
	Disorder free ie no frost, scorch, nutrient deficiency, drought symptoms	
	No signs of ill health	
	Good vigour for species - Looks healthy and vitality of tree overall	
	Live buds -Good density of buds or foliage in balance and proportion	
	No damage to branches or bark like poor pruning scars or root damage	
	Live veins not compromised or damaged	
	Healthy foliage colour and no damage	
Score	Max score to start = 10	Deduct 2 points for any of the items listed that don't work
Pot	Tree shown to best advantage including placement in pot	
	Rocks / slabs should be given the same consideration when used instead of a pot.	
	Colour harmonises with tree	
	Correct size for tree and foliage	
	Correct shape for tree	
	Correct depth not too deep or too shallow	
	Un-damaged pot with no water marks or lime scale	
Score	Max score to start = 20	Deduct 3 points for any of the items listed that don't work
Preparation of tree	Appropriate surface treatment of fine nature to accentuate exhibit	
	Weed free & liverworts cleaned off trunk & soil surface where appropriate	
	Present tree to best advantage	
	Moss if used healthy and of good colour	
	Wire if used to be neat & no wire scars & neat guys if used and discrete	
	Clean pot	
	Mimic a landscape or nature	
	Space between the foliage reduces the visual weight and provides light and air within the composition	

Score	Max score to start = 20	Deduct 3 points for any of the items listed that don't work
Display	Appropriate use of accent or bronze or suiseiki if used	
	Appropriate use of scroll or image if used	
	Display table or stand suitable shape /colour / size (height & width) and undamaged with no scratches	
	Placement of tree, scroll, accent harmonious	
	Good use of allocated space and consideration of negative space	
	Clean presentation of all elements from tree to stand to accent / bronze	
	Tree species suits the style / shape for species	
	Tree well ramified or developed showing maturity / impression of age	
	Tree considered to be final image and finished	
	Tree is of correct proportions for image and displayed correctly showing front	
Score	Max score to start = 30	Deduct 5 points for any of the items listed that don't work
Overall impression of exhibit	Presents with harmony	
	Tree / pot combination complimentary	
	Balanced display showing naturalness	
	All elements work	
	Tree and any accents healthy	
	Shows thought and consideration and refinement of presentation	
	No distracting or detracting features present	
	Originality of overall composition including artistic impression and architectural composition	