



# Companion Plants

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by Stu Innes

*Shitakusa* refers to plantings that are intended as companions to actual bonsai in display settings, and are true companion plantings.

*Kusamono* refers to plantings that are intended to be viewed in their own right. They often have similarities to shitakusa in their composition, although are generally larger.

This article relates to Shitakusa specifically, although many principles such as species used and care may relate to both. Be aware that the term “companion plants” can also refer to plants located beside each other in gardens, which have symbiotic advantages; nothing to do with bonsai.

The purpose of a companion planting is to enhance and support the display of the bonsai overall. It helps to provide a sense of the environment surrounding the bonsai, to reinforce the sense of scale, and often to add to the composition overall in a number of ways through placement and compliment in colour, shape, and texture.

The companion planting therefore is often targeted to support a specific bonsai. Ideally one starts by looking at the bonsai with a blank backdrop, and asking “what is missing from or unclear in this vision?” If not, then placement in a show must be done with due considerations, and only where it enhances the display.

## Species and their meaning

The species used in the planting should be consistent among themselves and especially with the species of the accompanied bonsai in terms of environment. Exceptions might work where, for instance, hardy moss represents tropical, a tiny grass represents tropical reeds, etc. But it must appear to be consistent (bonsai is often about deception). Consider tropical vs. native environments, arid vs. forest vs. wetland/rainforest; do the species all potentially reinforce the same conditions? If your bonsai implies or is revealing a seasonal aspect (leaf colour, flowering, lushness) then the companion plants should as well. All species on a container must overwinter together, so must have a common survival zone.

Attempt to reflect the overall style of the main bonsai and environment, including conditions of growth (windy, alpine, lushness, etc.). In some cases the companion actually completes or reinforces the environment or season through flowering, lushness or sparseness, rock vs. moss, etc.



## Some typical situations:

- ▶ A mountain scene might best utilize short grasses, and tiny alpine plants.
- ▶ Warmer climate root-on-rock settings may benefit from moss and trailing groundcovers (e.g. thyme) representing vines cascading downward, even small shrubs and blooming plants could fit. That is, these species may work on a companion plant (not often used with these styles), or on the rock planting itself.
- ▶ Forest scenes might benefit from shallow companions with forest-edge plants such as grasses, tiny shrubs, ground covers (on rock if consistent with the forest), or wetland material if it's a shore-side scene.
- ▶ A cedar or spruce bonsai could have accompanying ferns and lush wetland plants. Flowering plants might be appropriate if valid for the season.
- ▶ Our pines may be best with very limited companions; perhaps mostly moss and small grasses or low shrubs. Accompanying stones often work better with a rocky scene than a companion plant, but a grass-on-rock item may add interest here.

Companions to tropical trees can include many types of flowering plants, shrubs, tiny orchids, mosses, ferns, ground covers, etc. Hardy or temperate species may simulate tropical species during show times, but all species in the companion container must be compatible in overwintering requirements.

Our experience is limited with arid displays, e.g. jade trees, but a few tiny succulents or cacti may work, or may not add much. Surface material may be more important.

That said, some of us enjoy just growing Shitakusa (and Kusamono) for the joy of viewing them on their own, and make use of them in displays when and if they add something. I do normally try to ensure that they are valid for our more common styles and species of bonsai. Our members have some very nice forests with perhaps more ground covers and tiny flowering species than fits our normal environment, but companion plants with similar species can work there.

A list of some frequently available species is provided at the end.

## Pots and containers

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Ideally, most companion plants should be in a very natural looking container to give a sense of being part of the surrounding environment, rather than being another object to focus on. This depends on the style of the bonsai and its container. In any case there should be a consistency; not necessarily exact – but supportive, in style, texture, and colour. Think of the bonsai, its container, and the companion plant as a large painting, its frame, and accompanying adornments or smaller paintings surrounding it. If there is much contrast in the main display, you want to match that somewhat, at least not further complicate it. If there is not, then at most a minor variation will work. A drastic variation between bonsai and companion in color, shape or texture, or clash of glazed and unglazed, will just take away from the main focus in most cases. As always, there are exceptions, and contrast can add interest to a somewhat drab situation.

Scale/proportion of the planting relative to the bonsai is crucial for a specific bonsai, and the required size of container falls from that. I have seen slightly oversized companions placed somewhat forward of the bonsai, or rarely back, to yield a visual perspective that worked.

The container should either be, or simulate a rock or slab, or have drainage holes and feet, as with any bonsai container. You might get by using tiny flat pots by adding spacers underneath that blend in well enough as feet. Not many typical, but just small, bonsai pots, as we often find locally, work well for companions in our shows, as they just suit larger bonsai than we often have in order to be in correct proportion. Tiny ones and more shallow ones may work. But many wonderful companion plants are composed using natural sections of hollow log or tiny stumps, worked stones (cavities or crevices for soil), or even bark sections.

Again, some typical situations:

- ▶ a broad apex bonsai in shallow pot calls for a broad shallow companion container, with rounded foliage shape overall, possibly spilling out on edge but not tall and spiked.
- ▶ a pointed or triangular apex bonsai might be complimented with a tall or spiked plant or similar shaped combination of them.
- ▶ a large tropical in glazed pot could utilize a similar glazed companion pot with flowering plants. Or alternately a log or stump container might fit for an apparent rainforest feel.
- ▶ a slanting mountain side bonsai might call for a small earth tone container of, or with, some rock, representing a small adjacent outcrop, or just use a rock instead.
- ▶ a cascade might call for a small semi- or full cascade container with a small vine or semi-cascade shrub appearing to be on the next outcrop.
- ▶ an anomaly might be for instance with a tall slender tree (even literati) in shallow round or oval pot. These trees are sometimes placed near the end of a long shallow pot. But a suitably placed shallow companion plant might yield a similar vision of sparse landscape and tall tree.
- ▶ a bonsai tree or forest on slab or rock could utilize a companion container made from a slab, porous or rock, or a shallow informally shaped ceramic container simulating same. In the latter case, it's best if foliage overlaps parts of the container.

These options can finish “telling the story” of the bonsai.

If mostly visible, a ceramic container should match the colour and style (including glazed or not) of the main pot as much as possible; you want it to blend in as an extension of the main pot or earth, or fade from view like it, as with many coniferous trees in dull pots. It may be possible to hide a less ideal container inside a hollowed log piece, moss or just thick overhanging growth, but let it stand out where it compliments an impressive bonsai pot well.

# Soil and watering considerations

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Tiny containers especially with wetland or tropical plants generally will need a more moisture retentive soil than usual. One option is to further sieve and combine the “fines” from larger soil component sieving. But too much pumice of any size makes it difficult to keep moist in the smallest pots, and it’s so light that it is easily lost. You can add carefully sieved peat moss or Seasol™ in very small containers. In very shallow pots, adding #1 grit will provide weight so that soil doesn’t wash or blow away as easily. The jury is still out on the author’s trials with part akadama in these pots. Once moss covered or fully grown, the plants help to hold things together, but some addition may be required through the summer.

If sufficiently frequent watering in hot weather is difficult due to your life style, the container can be set into a larger sand or bonsai soil, or at least sphagnum for shade and some moisture. Lift them and trim any roots egressing the pot before display, and do so occasionally regardless, in order to maintain fine roots in the container and limit growth.

Species that flower in the sun (e.g. lantana and many annuals and natives) must have lots of time in the sun, hence demanding frequent watering. Others might survive best with afternoon or all day indirect light during mid-summer. Most ferns and wetland plants will appreciate that anyway.

Go easy with fertilizing. In many cases you want limited growth. Soluble chemical forms are likely better in tiny pots, it’s difficult to keep good conditions for organics, and solid forms are noticeable and easily lost.

## Grooming for display

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Plan ahead to do advanced pruning to produce fresh new growth and/or blooms at show time. 10-14 days is often enough for small plants to recover in midsummer. Ground covers tend to need frequent pruning to keep nice foliage and growth at the center. The author has spent much time nipping dead or drying leaves off inner stems of thymes or sedum, and lifting new shoots up to hide those stems. In most cases, creepers like thyme and sedum sprawl over the rim everywhere very quickly, but instead look best just poking out here and there, and perhaps not more than halfway down the edge of any horizontal pot at the tip. Large shoots rising against the outer rim of the pot may be unsightly. Plants should either be a natural looking mass as in a lush environment, or show distinct features, not halfway overgrown on each other, which appears unkempt. Prune out-of-scale leaves. Maintain the desired profile.

Grass blades on coarse (e.g. mondo) grass should not be pruned on end, leaving browned obviously cut ends, although I have cheated with angular end cuts just at show time where a blade was crucial. Overly long blades may be out of proportion with the rest of the planting or become marked. Remove the whole blade, cutting close to the stem where hidden. Doing this early will help.

Clean the pot or containers as with regular bonsai pots; ensure moss or other soil covering is intact. If sitting in another container of sand/etc. for moisture retention, lift it a week or two early and trim roots extending through the drainage hole, to allow time to recover.

Remove old dead blades and dead leaves on other plants with tweezers or fine shears. Tweezers are your friend, and avoid much damage from big fingers. Clean every bit of fallen matter. Every detail in a tiny container becomes apparent, and a single tree seed, pine needle, or dead blade of lawn grass forsakes the scaled vision. Stand back, and check the result at the display level. And enjoy!

## Species useful for Companion Plantings

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This is not a comprehensive list, just some that are often used, and with an emphasis on hardy varieties. Always keep lookout for small surrounding plants when obtaining yamadori bonsai. Also, cuttings from many shrubs with small leaves can create small bushes if pruned often e.g. boxwood, potentilla, myrtle and seedlings of larch, pine, spruce, sometimes work as smaller plants. etc. Start your shopping by checking with other club members.

Note: In getting those with runners and e.g. thyme or sedum to root, plant them shallow at first, and drop more soil over all; better than pushing stems in, which tends to disturb the whole container and damage foliage.

These species often are also used on Kusamono, root-on-rock mountain scenes, etc.

### Tropical Species

Axilflower (GoldDust® *Mecardonia hybrid*) – beautiful tiny yellow blooms on tiny green creeping stems. Prune back frequently. Remove dead stems quickly, which turn black.

Lantana – probably need to start from a cutting to be small. Could work beside a large bonsai. Prolific flowerer with various shades of orange, red, yellow, pink, usually multicolour. Water and prune often.

Miniature orchids.

### Temperate Species

Alpine geranium (*Erodium reichardii*) – tiny geranium look with small bright pink flowers. Spreads by short runners; sink them in. Fills out but main stem keeps lengthening like an African violet; best replaced with new plants occasionally.

Azalea – Use small varieties as shrubs; flowers are typically spent by show times.

Cape Blanco sedum (*Sedum spathulifolium* 'Cape Blanco') - light gray/white; looks great on gray featherstone. Brittle and not hardy. Turns less attractive creamy colour in full sun.

Mondo grass - green or black. Drought tolerant. Spreads by root. Tends to get overly long blades unless restrained or in a larger planting.

### Hardy/Semi hardy Species

Some of these are marginal for our horticultural zone but can be successfully kept with good snow cover because of their small size.

Bugleweed (*Ajuga sp.*) – Possibly 'chocolate chip', a smaller variety. Low ground cover; blue/purple flowers. Variegated varieties are generally large.

Corsican mint – tiny green creeper. Not really hardy here but has survived in very good cover. Brighter green than thymes, similar look to mecardonia but very shallow growth and not the flowers.

Grasses - Small varieties (e.g. lawn bowling types) can work, but those that clump rather than spread retain nicer shape usually.

Blue eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium angustifolium*) - A guess as to what I obtained from a wetland, but a candidate regardless. Flat vertical body at first, cute tall seed stalks. Nice small size.

Ferns - Oak fern (*Gymnocarpium dryopteris*) – horizontal tri-part fronds on straight upright stems. Reduces size well, but spreads invasively by root.

Common rock polypody (*Polypodium virginianum*) – a hardy fern. Typical but stocky fern shape, nice small size. Quite drought resistant, even grows on rock crevices.

Forget-me-not - small varieties e.g. *Myosotis sylvatica* 'Mon Amie Blue'. May decline in late summer.

Hen & chicks (*Sempervivum tectorum*) - small varieties, used individually or in small numbers as a small plant/bush, or small area for arid scenes. Ensure it's a small variety, they all start small.

Hostas - Dwarf hostas reduce well to approx. 2 inch height. Mouse ears (plain dull green), Mini Skirt & Cameo (both variegated) varieties can be found. They will bloom.

Johnny jump ups (*Viola tricolor*) – blue/violet/yellow blooms, needs frequent deadheading and pruning back, must start with a new seedling early spring. I have rooted tiny cuttings.

Kinnikinnick/Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) – tricky to root. Pervasive in sandy forest edges though hard to find useful roots, but great looking if you succeed. Nice green foliage; keep stems pruned.

Mosses – many varieties. Look for mosses that grow in the sun. Different varieties can be used as multi-coloured mounds in one pot as well.

Scotch moss, Irish moss - Not true mosses, and I don't recommend them unless by themselves. They become thin and sprawled out on rock plantings, and are very difficult to get rid of anywhere. These are common names used locally, but those names can refer to other species, and the scientific names (I'll call them *Sagina subulata*) are also inconsistent.

*Potentilla alba* – (note: potentillas may be called cinquefoil) a very white flowered low groundcover that makes a nice low shrub. I've read that it's native to northern mountains in Europe, but was collected locally. Foliage may redden in full sun.

*Potentilla indica* – looks like tiny yellow-flowered strawberry, with tiny red fruit to match. Keep runners pruned often. Wild strawberry may work in larger compositions (Kusamono perhaps).

Pussy toes – several white/cream flowered varieties (*Antennaria parvifolia* – 'little-leaf', *A. microphylla* 'small leaf'). Pink flowered *Antennaria dioica* and dwarf *A.d.* 'Minima' are varieties sometimes sold. All silver grey ground covers that spread via runners above the surface; sink or cover the nodes to root. Good luck confirming the variety, but easy to get from members.

Raspberry (wild) (*Rubus idaeus*) – will reduce to tiny size. Remove bigger woody stems after new shoots appear in spring.

Sedums (stonecrop) – many smaller varieties may work. Can sometimes use to simulate a small bush or tropical plant using just one compact rooted part (1-5 heads). Otherwise tends to imply an arid region.

Sedum Angelina (*Sedum rupestre* 'Angelina') more yellow/orange and compact in good sun, a bit large and green otherwise. Prune often to minimize size.

*Sedum divergens* – tiny lobe shaped leaves, turns reddish in full sun. Prune stems often for a compact ground-hugging appearance and to avoid bare old stems.

The next two are often called by their scientific names:

Little Angel Dwarf Burnet (*Sanguisorba officinalis* 'Little Angel') – variegated leaves on thin stems; very delicate look. Needs good light and pruning to contain length of stems in tiny plantings.

Rockfoil (*Saxifragia sp.*) – various varieties may work. Keep stems pruned for small leaf and stem size, especially as a ground cover. Small pink or dark red flowers.

Thyme – elfin (*Thymus serpyllum* 'Elfin') is the smallest, most compact, a real ground hugger, and most hardy. Great for the tiniest companion or mountain landscape. Lemon thyme (*Thymus citriodorus*) has yellow tones if in the sun; a bit taller, may need pruning to keep compact. Or vertical growth can be encouraged for a vertical or cascade design. Woolly thyme (*Thymus pseudolanuginosus*) is fuzzy and greyish, but less hardy.