



Companion Plants

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.

