

Introduction to Bonsai

By Keith Warren

Bonsai (pronounced bone-sigh) is the Japanese term meaning something being grown in a shallow container - a tree in a pot. It is a living art form tracing its ancestry back over four thousand years when ancient Chinese and Persians first developed and grew dwarfed plants in containers. The art of dwarfing trees was introduced into Japan in the twelfth century. The Japanese have refined and developed the art and science of Bonsai over the years. Although the Japanese styles are best known in the West, the Chinese art is known as “Penjing”. Bonsai didn’t become popular in the United States until after the 1940’s.

What species of trees are used for bonsai? Any species of tree can be made into a bonsai but the best selection is those species with small or dwarf leaves. Traditionally, most bonsai trees are hardy species that require a cold dormant period and are grown outdoors year round and brought indoors only for a few days at a time to be displayed. But half-hardy and tender species are gaining popularity so that they can be grown and enjoyed indoors year round.

How are bonsai trees cultivated? There is no special “bonsai seed”. Though you can grow a bonsai from seed, it is a slow process. You can start with a rooted cutting but most hobbyists collect nursery stock that has several years’ growth that has a nice trunk and good branching. It then only takes a few years to define its shape with top pruning and adapted into a bonsai pot with root pruning. You can also purchase “pre-bonsai” plants from a bonsai nursery for a reasonable price that has been top pruned for several years. Finished bonsai, already adapted into a bonsai pot, are much more expensive but very tempting to purchase!

What are the hallmarks of a good bonsai? The goal is to make the tree look like a mature tree found in nature. There should be major roots visible and the transition into the trunk gives the impression that the tree is firm and secure, well rooted into the soil. The shape and appearance of the trunk is of particular importance in miniature trees. It is usually visible from the roots to high up into the crown of the tree while looking at the front side of the tree. The base of the trunk should be the thickest and tapers as it reaches the crown of the tree. Prune out minor branches and keep only those branches that are well spaced and extend from the trunk on the left, right and back sides. Prune out branches growing straight out from the front of the tree in order to show off the trunk. Branches, like the trunk, should be thickest nearest the ground and taper in thickness as they reach the top. The tree should not be pruned to look like a solid hedge but rather one should see space between the branched leaf masses which simulates age. The general overall shape of the foliage should be an isosceles triangle.

What are the popular styles used to shape a bonsai? The third page of this handout shows the six major styles used for a single tree bonsai. “Informal upright” is probably the most popular. There are other styles that are popular also such as semi-cascade, full cascade, clumps (3 trees), groves (5 or 7) or

forests (more than 7 trees). If a forest is designed well with different sized trees and they are placed in such a way that creates the illusion of depth it is a particularly beautiful bonsai to see.

Basic General Care of Bonsai

When and how much should I root prune? Roots should be pruned whenever a plant is potted for the first time and every time it is repotted. The best time to do this is early spring to minimize shock. Deciduous are usually the first to be done in February thru March just as the leaf buds are beginning to swell. Once they leaf out you run the risk of losing the new leaves. You can cut back the roots by half on deciduous species and even bare root. Once potted and leafed out you must keep it from freezing until the end of the growing season. Evergreen and broad-leaf species are pruned after the deciduous trees but cut back the roots by only a third and do not remove more than half the soil of the root ball. Older mature trees require even less amount of root removal. Deciduous trees usually need to be root pruned every 1-2 years, evergreens every 2-3 years and pines once every 4-5 years. You know it is time to repot and root prune when after removing the tree from the pot you only see a mass of roots and see very little soil. After root pruning, keep in morning sun and out of wind for a month.

What kind of soil should I use? As with any container grown plant drainage is very important, especially with bonsai!!! In hot summer we need to water our bonsai daily so the soil cannot compact. Every hobbyist has their own formula for their bonsai soil but 1/3 to 1/2 of the soil should be non-organic materials to supply excellent drainage and aeration. The rest can be a loose potting soil or fine pine bark mix but never use soil from your garden.

What about fertilizing? After root pruning and repotting wait a month before apply fertilizer. Yes you heard me right – a month! Some hobbyists use a slow release fertilizer such as Osmocote. Unless we have unusual amounts of rain in spring, this slow release will last the growing season. Some people that use it will also give their bonsai a dose of chemical fertilizer in spring to “jump start” the fast growing conditions of spring. Slow release is popular of course because you don’t need to remember to hand-feed on a regular basis. Some growers like to use balanced chemical fertilizer. If doing so always **remember to dilute by one-half strength**. There is no need to risk burning the roots and no need to push top growth. We are talking about bonsai here! We fertilize bonsai for health not size. Most of us fertilizing by hand do it twice a month starting a month after repotting up to September 15th. You can use very weak low nitrogen fertilizer past September for evergreens. Tropical bonsai can be fertilized in fall and winter in the home but only once a month is enough.

How often should I water? That’s an easy answer. NEVER LET THEM DRY OUT. In hot summer, water once a day. In spring and fall water maybe every 2-3 days. Just look at them daily.

How much light do they need? Full sun, except in HOT summer, then reduce light by 1/3 or 1/2.

When do I trim the foliage? Whenever it starts looking shaggy - perhaps 2-3 times a year. Deciduous grow faster. (If you want to thicken a branch, leave it untrimmed for a whole year)

Where are they stored in winter? You can sink your hardy trees in the ground and mulch in or put into an unheated garage. Bring tropical bonsai back into the home when temperatures drop to 55 degrees at night. Don't forget to check the soil for moisture if outside or in the garage during winter!