

The Art of Bonsai

By Kathy Wolfe
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Bringing harmony and peace to your life

When the term “bonsai” is mentioned, many of us conjure up an image of a windswept cypress, wood-bleached trunks grouped together in an ancient forest stand, or a cascade of branches reaching to the ground. This refined Japanese art form uses miniature trees in containers to create an illusion of ancient specimens. The name itself means “planting in a tray,” with “bon” meaning a low-sided pot and “sai” meaning a planting.

Originating in the Chinese art of Penjing over 2,000 years ago, the Japanese adapted it for themselves over 1,000 years ago. While the bonsai grower experiences the pleasure of creating and adding original design to the tree form, the viewer enjoys the contemplation of the tree’s beauty.

Whether creating or viewing, there are good local resources to explore the subject. The Pacific Bonsai Museum (www.pacificbonsaimuseum.org) in Federal Way is a wonderful place to visit to see examples from around the world of the many styles of bonsai. There are regional organizations, e.g., the Puget Sound Bonsai Association (www.psba.us/) in Seattle and the Evergreen Bonsai Club in Bremerton (www.evergreenbonsaiclub.com), that offer classes and lectures to anyone interested. Check your locale for other groups and classes that may take place where you live.

A bonsai can begin with a cutting, a seedling or a small tree of almost any perennial woody-stemmed tree or shrub that produces true branches and can withstand remaining small in its confined pot. These are not dwarf plant species but plants trained over time to a miniature size. The tree species and style chosen must complement each other.

Five basic styles of bonsai include formal upright, informal upright, slanting, semi-cascading and full cascade. Other forms can include raft (mimicking a tree fallen on its side with branches rising vertically); literati (characterized by a bare trunk line); group/forest; broom style; exposed root; root over rock; double trunk; weeping and clumping. A single bonsai can include more than one of these forms.

Shallow ceramic pots with vertical sides are often used. These pots have drainage holes in the bottom that are covered with screening to keep the dirt in and the bugs out. Alternatively, a flat rock slab with soil mounded above the rock surface can be used.

In more recent times, concrete and glass-reinforced plastic pots have also been incorporated. Pots can be changed over the period it takes the bonsai to grow to its final form. At that time, a permanent pot is chosen to display the tree in its most striking way.



Training bonsai can be a long and enjoyable journey. Pruning is used for maintenance as well as shaping of both the branches and the roots. This is generally done in early spring and autumn. Defoliation is a part of the pruning process that consists of removing unwanted leaves in order to keep them small and encourage new ones to develop. This is often done in June. Branch selection and removal is also an important training procedure to sculpt the tree to its final stage.

Wiring, using annealed copper or anodized aluminum wire of various sizes, is used to wrap branches and carefully move them to a desired position over time. This can be tricky. Beginners should consult a bonsai expert, bonsai organization, reputable publications or reliable on-line sources to learn specific techniques.

Bonsai care includes specific watering requirements depending on the tree species, the season, and the weather. It is important to constantly check the soil to make sure it is never completely dried out but not overwatered and flooding the roots.

A plant mister is a good way to emulate rain and irrigate the entire tree. The soil composition will also influence how much watering is required. An ideal soil balance will depend on the tree used. Again, seek expert advice on this.

Placement of the bonsai is another consideration. In this article, we focus on traditional Japanese bonsai, which is grown outdoors its entire lifespan. For growing an indoor bonsai, consult other sources for specific lighting, humidity control and pest/fungal management to be used in the home.



Outdoor bonsai are best placed to receive both morning and afternoon sun and be protected from strong winds.

Because bonsai tree roots are restricted to the pot containing them, fertilizer is required, in various quantities throughout the year, especially during its growing season. The balance of nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus needed during each season varies. Consult care books and other resources for your particular tree species.

Repotting is necessary for the roots to maintain healthy space in the container and not become pot-bound. Early spring is a good time to perform this chore. Each species has its own repotting needs depending on how quickly the tree grows. Check roots each spring for encircling, a sign that repotting should be done. Protect newly repotted plants from overexposure to sun, rain and winds; do not prune or fertilize for at least a month.

Check continuously for signs of pests or disease. As in nature, bonsai can attract many unwanted visitors. Ask a specialist regarding controls you might need to apply.

Is bonsai gardening for you? If you are a gardener looking for instant results, perhaps not. If you seek a relaxing and rewarding hobby that can bring harmony and peace to your life, as well as a vast amount of gardening knowledge, grab your patience and persistence and enjoy this delightful pastime.



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RESOURCES:

- “Bonsai Styles.” Brooklyn Botanical Garden staff. February 8, 2011.
www.bbg.org/gardening/article/bonsai_styles
- “Bonsai Tree Types and General Care Guide.” The Fusion Network. Copyright 2004-2008.
www.bonsaigardener.org/bonsai-tree-types.html
- “Bonsai Styles.” Brooklyn Botanical. Garden.
https://www.bbg.org/gardening/article/bonsai_styles
- “Local Bonsai Resources.” Puget Sound Bonsai Association.
<http://www.psba.us/local-resources/>
- “Origin of Bonsai.” Bonsai Empire.
<http://www.bonsaiempire.com/origin>
- “Grow a Bonsai.”
<http://growabonsai.com/>

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.