



Growing & Maintaining Plants Trained in the Art of Bonsai

BONSAI (pronounced “bohn-sigh”) is an ancient art form developed in China over 1,000 years ago, later adopted by the Japanese in the 11th or 12th century. It became a precise art form by the 1500s with well-defined standards. By the end of the 19th century, specimens began to trickle into the West, but this method of cultivating did not become popular in America and Europe until after World War II.



CHOOSING YOUR POT

“Bon” is “a tray” and “sai” is “to grow.” Therefore, the word bonsai means “planting in a shallow container” and this underlines the importance of the pot. As a rule of thumb, the volume of the container should be about 1/3 of the total size of the plant. The inside should be unglazed. At the bottom, there must be at least one drainage hole.

CHOOSING YOUR SOIL

Your Bonsai plant will need a good soil mixture of the following:

20% Pumice, which is good for aeration and contains over 70 minerals responsible for a healthy root system.
 20% Pine Bark, an organic matter that absorbs nutrients to slowly release them as needed.
 10% Charcoal, which helps filter water, absorbs impurities, and also improves aeration.
 20% Small Lava Rock, which improves drainage and helps develop finer roots.
 10% Compost, which provides nutrients, but must be used sparingly as it can compact.
 20% Akadama (Baked Clay), which is slightly acidic and holds the right amount of moisture in the soil.

CHOOSING YOUR PLANTS

Now for the plants themselves. A vast number of trees and shrubs can be grown. Some examples of suitable Bonsai plants are listed, but you can try others.

TEMPERATE PLANT TYPES

Evergreen Foliage:

Abies (Fir)
Cedrus (Cedar)
Juniperus (Juniper)
Pinus (Pine)

Deciduous Foliage:

Acer (Maple)
Quercus (Oak)
Salix (Willow)
Ginkgo (Maidenhair Tree)

Flowers or Fruit:

Rhododendron (Azalea)
Malus (Crabapple)
Pyracantha (Firethorn)
Wisteria (Wisteria)

TROPICAL PLANT TYPES

Foliage:

Ficus
Schefflera
Dracaena
Ponytail Palm
Arailia

Succulent:

Crassula ovata (Jade)
Portulacaria afra (Elephant bush)
Adenium (Desert rose)
Sedum

Flowering:

Brazil Raintree
Barbados Cherry
Jasmine
Gardenia
Hibiscus
Bougainvillea

ENVIRONMENT

Its home should be outdoors in temperate conditions and if you have a collection they should be placed so that you can see them from a window, with some protection from high winds and heavy rain. Daily watering is necessary in summer but in the winter once or twice a week is sufficient. Use rainwater whenever possible and include liquid fertilizer in spring and summer using about 1/4 the recommended amount. Misting the foliage on hot summer days prevents dehydration. Roots of temperate plants must be kept from freezing. If your choice of a Bonsai plant is a tropical one then the fertilization schedule would be 1x a month during the growing season. Tropical Bonsai plants can be set outdoors during the warmer seasons but need to be housed indoors during the colder months.

PRUNING

Root and stem pruning are the arts you must learn. In spring, take the plant out of its pot and see if its roots have started to encircle the soil ball. If so, cut them back by about 1/3 and remove some of the old soil. For conifers this root pruning should be less drastic. Put the plant back in its pot with some fresh compost or soil and protect from strong winds until it is well-established. Keep well watered and do not feed until new growth appears. No carefully prune the shoots. Removing the tip will stimulate branching and removing lower side shoots will create the trunk. Bonsai wire can be used to shape the trunk, but you must remove this wire before it starts to cut in the stem. Branches can be made to weep by hanging weights on them.

The art of Bonsai is rather like keeping a living pet ... it will have to be cared for every day and you will have to keep watch on its progress. But the rewards are GREAT for the avid gardener who enjoys a challenging hobby and who has a deep love for plants.

FERTILIZER

Fertilizer and nutrients need to be supplied bi-weekly throughout the growing season. Consistent fertilizing provides new growth allowing for trimming and shaping of your plants. The more trimming and shaping you are able to do, the more your Bonsai will grow!

BONSAI WIRE

The objective of Bonsai is to create the appearance of an aged tree in miniature. Wire use is one way to help achieve this objective. Once the plant is able to hold its shape on its own the wire can be adjusted or removed.

DAILY CARE

Trimming new growth is an on-going process. Feeding, root pruning and repotting are done on an as-needed basis in order to maintain the plant's size and shape. Wiring, tying and arranging limbs must be worked in as well. A good Bonsai can be created in an afternoon. An extra fine Bonsai usually takes years to develop.

One of the most common problems that arises is the constant need of maintenance due to the small amount of soil available in the often small and shallow pot. A healthy Bonsai in spring can easily consume the moisture in its pot in a single day. Fertilizer and nutrients need to be supplied bi-weekly throughout the growing season. If you successfully grow and feed a Bonsai, it will become root bound in one or two seasons and thus need repotting. Soil mixtures and drainage capabilities figure in with maintenance.