

Growing Bonsai

By

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Growing Bonsai

- **Bonsai:** A small tree or woody plant growing in a pot, that looks like a big old tree in nature (a beautiful big old tree!)
- A short digression on pronunciation
- There are two different Japanese words
 - Banzai (pronounced “bahn-zi”) A Japanese cheer or war cry
 - Bonsai (pronounced “bone-sigh”) A tree in a pot
- **Bonsai is an horticultural art**
 - Horticulture is key to keeping the tree alive and healthy
 - Art is involved in shaping the tree to look like a big old tree

Let's Talk About The Horticultural Aspects First

Soil, Water, and Sun are Horticultural Basics

- Bonsai soil is different from house plant soil
- Bonsai soil should be a fast-draining, rather coarse mixture that:
 - Retains enough moisture to supply water and nutrients to the roots
 - Has plenty of empty spaces to allow the roots to have access to air
 - Provides structural support for the tree
- There is consensus within the bonsai community on the three requirements above, but ...
 - Beyond that, there is no consensus on the best soil mix ... and lots of strong opinions
 - Fortunately, there are many different soil mixes that work quite well
- Basic mix: 50/50 mix of #1 Cherry Stone grit & Soil Pep mulch
 - Locally available materials & inexpensive

Periodic Repotting Provides Fresh Soil For Roots

Repotting Basics

- Most bonsai should be repotted every 2 to 4 years
 - Bonsai need to be repotted when the pot is filled with roots
 - Repotting frequency is not critical
 - Most trees should be repotted in the spring
- Repotting process
 - Remove root ball from pot
 - Remove about 1/3 of the soil on the sides and bottom
 - Cut off the exposed roots
 - Trim surface roots to improve appearance
 - Put fresh soil on bottom of pot & wire root ball to pot
 - Put fresh soil around sides
 - Water thoroughly & keep in shade for a week

What About Water & Sun?

Sun and Water

- **Most bonsai are outdoor trees**
 - They are grown outside on benches
 - They need sunshine, some need a lot, others need less
- **Bonsai are grown in pots, so they need to be watered**
 - In summer, most bonsai need water daily – in spring & fall less often
 - Water thoroughly from top, pots have drain holes
 - Never let soil dry out completely, of course!
- **Watering leaches nutrients from soil, so fertilizer is needed**
 - Inorganic commercial fertilizer is okay
 - Fertilizer can be applied weekly to monthly depending on tree & season

Bonsai Require Different Care In Different Seasons

Summer Care

- **Outdoor Site Considerations**
 - Trees should be outside on benches
 - Most trees can tolerate sunshine for most of the day
 - Maples need shade in the afternoon
 - ♦ If shade is not available, put up shade cloth
 - ♦ Or don't raise maples
- **Water, Fertilizer, & Other Care**
 - Water most trees daily
 - Vacation water options: Trusted friend or automatic water system
 - Fertilize every week or two
 - Hose off foliage of junipers weekly to control red spider mites

What About Fall Care?

Fall Care

- **Water**
 - Water less frequently as needed (typically every 2 or 3 days)
- **Outdoor Weather Considerations**
 - Move tropicals & sub-tropicals inside when lows are below 50F
 - Hardy deciduous trees
 - ♦ Leave out until leaves drop & fully dormant
 - ♦ Then move them to winter quarters
 - Conifers (junipers, pines, spruce, etc)
 - ♦ Leave out until fully dormant in mid to late November
 - ♦ They can tolerate light freezes before move to winter quarters
- **Winter Quarters**
 - Tropicals: In house under grow lights
 - Hardy trees: In garage, unheated building, or in the ground

Winter Care Is Important

Winter Care

- **Hardy Trees in Garage or Unheated Building**
 - Water about every 2 weeks – make sure soil doesn't dry completely
 - If root balls are frozen, they don't need water
 - Light is not needed in winter quarters, photosynthesis is close to zero
- **Hardy Trees in Ground**
 - Protect from rabbits
- **Tropicals in Winter Quarters**
 - In house under grow lights
 - Water as needed – every 2 or 3 days
 - Vacation water options: Trusted friend or automatic water system
 - Fertilize regularly

Spring Care Is Time Intensive

Spring Care

- **Hardy Trees in Garage or Unheated Building**
 - Move conifers out when nights are above freezing (usually March)
 - Move deciduous out in daytime when they start budding out
 - Move deciduous back inside when night temperature is below 40 F
 - Repot deciduous when buds are developing
 - Repot conifers before middle of May
- **Hardy Trees in Ground**
 - Dig out when ground has thawed (usually late March, early April)
- **Tropicals in Winter Quarters**
 - Move outside on benches when night temperatures are above 50 F
 - Can be repotted any time of the year

A Lot About Horticulture, What About The Art?

Shaping a Bonsai

- **What makes a bonsai look like a beautiful big old tree?**
 - A tapered trunk with an interesting shape
 - Trunk flare with strong surface roots (nebari)
 - Fine branches
 - Foliage that is small in scale
 - Bark, rough or smooth
- **Any tree or shrub with a woody trunk, fine branches, & small leaves is fair game to be a bonsai**
- **Bonsai are shaped by trimming & wiring**
 - Unneeded branches are removed
 - Taper is developed in trunks & branches by trimming
 - The shapes of trunks & branches are changed by wiring

Special Tools & Wire Are Used

Bonsai Tools & Wire

- There are a number of special tools used for bonsai
 - Concave branch cutters
 - Trimming shears
 - Wire cutters & wire/jin pliers
 - Root rakes & root cutters
 - There are other specialized tools
- Both aluminum & copper bonsai wire is available
- Wiring basics
 - Wire is either anchored in the soil or around another branch
 - Wire is then wrapped in a spiral around the branch or trunk
 - The branch or trunk is bent to desired shape
 - Wire is removed before the branch grows into the wire

How Do You Decide On The Shape Of A Bonsai?

Traditional Bonsai Shapes or Styles

- Traditional styles have been defined by Japanese masters
 - Formal upright: straight trunk, “pine-tree” style
 - Informal upright: trunk curved, but upright – most common style
 - Slant: trunk slants to left or right
 - There are other less common styles
- Raw material used for bonsai will determine the style to use
 - Traditional styles are useful guide for styling
 - Each bonsai will be different



Stylized upright form
Owned by Elaine Barrett

If Interested In Growing Bonsai, How Can You Start?

Getting Started

- **How to Start Growing Bonsai**
 - Read a book – The Bonsai Handbook by David Prescott
 - Join a club
 - Iowa Bonsai Association – Des Moines
 - Nebraska Bonsai Society – Omaha / Lincoln
- **Initial Decisions**
 - Where can you grow your bonsai – outside or inside or both?
 - Develop your own or buy? I suggest developing your own first
- **Acquire pre-bonsai material or early stage bonsai**
 - Buy pre-bonsai from landscape nursery
 - Collect trees from yard or fields
 - Buy early stage bonsai online or ?
 - Rule #1: Keep it alive

It Is The Journey That Counts, Not The Destination!

Concluding Remarks

- **Bonsai: A small tree or woody plant growing in a pot, that looks like a big old tree in nature (a beautiful big old tree!)**
- **Bonsai is an horticultural art form**
- **Bonsai need proper soil, watering, and year round care**
- **Bonsai are shaped by trimming & wiring**
- **You can grow your own!**

Are There Questions?

- We have time for questions now
- If you have questions later, feel free to shoot me an email at mjsamiller@westianet.net

A Partial Bibliography of Bonsai Books

Really good general books:

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Onishi, Katsuhito. The Bonsai Art of Kimura. Stone Lantern Publishing Company, Sudbury, MA, 1992.

Good magazines:

Journal of the American Bonsai Society – see www.absbonsai.org

International Bonsai – see www.internationalbonsai.com

Bonsai Today – inactive, succeeded by Bonsai Focus, see www.stonelantern.com

Bonsai Focus – see www.bonsaifocus.com

Good websites:

Nebraska Bonsai Society – see www.nebonsai.org

Phoenix Bonsai Society – see www.phoenixbonsai.com

www.bonsai4me.com

www.bonsaiprimer.com

www.evergreengardenworks.com

http://blogs.knowledgeofbonsai.org/rob_kempinski/

www.kaizenbonsai.com

www.bonsai-bci.com

<http://peterteabonsai.wordpress.com>

<http://ofbonsai.org>

<http://crataegus.com>

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