



## Bonsai for Beginners



*Bonsai is an enjoyable hobby for people with all kinds of growing backgrounds. It combines the realization of gardening and the challenges of creating art.*

*Beginners should enjoy the process of training the bonsai while learning how to grow them. Think of bonsai as simply a plant in a small pot. Let the experts get worried about the "best" fertilizer or the "best" soil. Concentrate on getting them to grow and have fun!*

### Five Beginners Mistakes

Watering Too Much  
Irregular Watering  
Growing in the House  
Potting Too Small  
Pruning Too Hard

#### Watering

Bonsai need to be kept slightly moist, not water logged. When bonsai are in sun or wind, they use more water. This may mean watering 2-3 times a day.

For many people watering while on vacation is the big disaster. Expecting someone with no bonsai experience to care for your plants is asking for trouble. An automated drip system run by batteries may work well.

#### Exposure

Most bonsai do best protected from the hot afternoon sun. Even sun tolerant plants will do better in afternoon shade. If in full sun all day, bonsai may need more water than is available in a small bonsai pot, and the soil may get too hot for good root development.

With few exceptions, bonsai need to be grown outdoors. Keep the bonsai protected from wind, as it will dry out plants as much as the sun.

Also, make sure your bonsai are placed in a stable area, as many are accidentally "pruned" by being knocked to the ground by wind or activity and even chewed by dogs!

#### Potting

Training pots should be large enough to

allow the plant to grow. A larger container is also easier to keep moist. Finished pots need to be sized to be in scale with the size, bulk and form of the bonsai. Again, remember that smaller pots are more difficult to keep alive and growing.

#### Fertilizing

When you are trying to get bonsai to grow and develop, a monthly application of a liquid fertilizer at half the rate is needed. Mature specimens may need fertilizing two-three times a year.

#### Pruning & Tools

Finished bonsai need to be pruned regularly. What "regularly" means depends on the growth of the plant. Plants in training need shaping, but be sure to leave enough foliage to allow the plant to grow.

Small shears help for tight areas and a concave cutter makes larger cuts that heal smoothly. Copper colored aluminum wire in different sizes will help move branches to just the right spot. Other tools can wait until you become more experienced.

#### Develop an Eye For It

The hardest thing to learn is seeing bonsai and not just to look at them. Learn by going to shows, books and joining the local bonsai club. Learning to see the potential takes time.

Look at the trunk, roots and main branches of prospected plants as these are the most difficult to change. *Continued on reverse...*



# Bonsai Continued



## Training Tips

When you get to the point where you know what your plant in training should look like, make a rough sketch to save that will help you decide which branch to keep and which to trim.

I find that pruning too much too soon stops the tree from growing, so take your time. Leave enough foliage to allow the plant to grow!

## Bonsai Starter Plants

These are plants that develop quickly from 2"-4" or #1 gallon starter plants. They recover from training and pruning mistakes quickly because of their fast growth.

**Serissa:** A fast growing flowering plant that develops a rough bark and blooms over a long season. Comes in green, variegated and dwarf forms. Useful for the less formal styles, including informal upright and cascade.

**Elm:** This varied group of plants include bonsai varieties like *Hokkaido* (small foliage and slow growing), *Seiju* (faster growing with small foliage and rough bark), *Frosty* (spreading variegated form for cascade or semi cascade).

**Ivy:** One of my favorites because of its fast growth. This can become an interesting cascade or semi cascade specimen quickly and needs frequent pruning which feels constructive! I use *Rochester* frequently because of its small foliage.

**Crabapples:** These plants have flowers and fruit. Placed in larger pots, they are fast developing. Most often used in upright styles.

**Pomegranate:** Both full sized (fruiting), and dwarf (flowering) varieties grow quickly into interesting plants. Depending on the variety, they have summer blooms, attractive fruit and fall color. Pomegranates are used typically in one of the informal styles like informal upright or cascade.

## Nursery Stock for Bonsai

These plants develop quickly from #1 or #5 gallon nursery plants.

**Japanese Maple:** There are a number of varieties that make interesting bonsai. Try *Butterfly* (variegated), *Dissectum* (green lace-leaf), or *Crimson Queen* (red lace leaf). Style will depend on the growth habit of the individual variety. They are used in almost any style. We

carry a good selection of unusual maples in the bonsai and regular Japanese Maple areas.

**Junipers:** Good varieties include spreading junipers like *Green Mound* and *San Jose*. Upright varieties like *Shimpaku* (*Sargent*), *Grey Gleam* and *Hollywood* work well also. Spreading types are used as semi to full cascades. Some of the upright varieties can be used in formal or informal upright trees. They are also used in the literati style.

**Pyracantha:** White flowers and red berries make for two seasons of interest. Use for one of the informal styles.

**Dwarf Pines:** *Mugho*, *Dwarf Scotch* and *Dwarf White Pines* are just a few in this group. *Japanese Black Pine* makes a nice bonsai but it may take several years to shape up from the initial cutting. Pine styles depend on the variety. I have seen beautiful formal upright *Black* and *Dwarf Scotch Pines* or *Weeping Red Pines* as cascades.

**Satsuki Azaleas:** There are a number of small leaved *Satsuki* Azalea that make wonderful spring blooming bonsai. These are useful as informal uprights or cascade forms.

**Alberta Spruce:** It takes a lot of nerve, but with ruthless pruning they can make excellent "jinned" (artificially created dead tops or branches that create the appearance of age) formal uprights or double trunked bonsai.

## Basic Styles



### Formal Upright

The tree grows straight up towards the sky.



### Literati Style

The tree trunk is bare except at the top



### In Formal Upright

The trunk winds round itself like a twisted cord.



### Broom

Tree in the form of a broom



### Slanting

Windswept, but with branches on both sides.



### Group Style

Except for trees planted in pairs, bonsai are always planted in an odd number.



### Semi-Cascade

Horizontal Branching as if over a cliff.



### Cascade

The trunk and branches hang down over the edge of the pot.



### Multi Trunked

Multiple trunks springing from the same place.