

OFF COURSE

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The Ancient Art of Bonsai

Bonsai is the art of taking a relatively young tree, making it look ancient, and then placing it in a harmonious pot. Any species of tree can be a bonsai, but trees with small foliage (leaves or needles), work best for purposes of scale. Big leaves on a small tree are not very natural looking. In some species, the leaves/needles can be reduced in size, but flowers and fruit do not reduce. A 12" tall apple tree with a full size apple on it is quite dramatic looking. Some of the more popular species used for bonsai are pines, junipers, spruce, elm, boxwood, ficus, bougainvillea, and azalea.

The artistic, and most difficult, aspect of bonsai is the styling of the tree. Making an immature tree look ancient takes great skill. One of the more common questions asked by people viewing bonsai for the first time is, "how old is the tree." To the bonsai artist the issue is not how old the tree is, but how old it looks. Bonsai is an art, but unlike a painting, it is never finished. The tree is always growing and changing.

What makes a tree look ancient? A base where the roots flare out all around the trunk makes it look firmly anchored to the ground. Branches that point downward makes it look as if years of snow and gravity have pulled them in that direction. The apex of the tree should have a round, almost flat, crown. This is unlike the distinctive features of a young tree: branches growing upward and an apex that is very pointed. Picture a Christmas tree. An old tree has an open front that gives a good look at the trunk line and shows branch placement. Conversely, a young tree has a bush-like canopy hiding everything from view.

How does the bonsai artist accomplish the task of making a tree look ancient? The most common method is pruning and wiring. The life of a bonsai is one of constant pruning. Its trunk and branches are heavily wired, especially in its early years. Wiring can get quite extensive, you might think some bonsai artists have an engineering degree if you saw how they can bend very thick branches using rebar, thick wire, and other gizmos. For bonsai, annealed copper wire is preferred due to its ability to stiffen after being bent. The annealing process softens the wire making it initially very easy to bend, but afterward it stiffens considerably due to its

atomic makeup. This makes copper ideal for wrapping around a branch, bending the branch, and making it stay in position. Copper-colored aluminum wire is also quite popular, but because it does not stiffen like copper, thicker wire must be used.

The number one rule in bonsai is to keep the tree alive. This is a tricky thing to do considering the stress that wiring and root pruning puts on a tree. Bonsai artists go to great lengths to protect their trees from the extremes of nature.

First, bonsai specimens need to be kept outdoors. It is very difficult to keep them alive indoors for any length of time. Anything other than a tropical species will eventually die indoors. Juniper, a very popular store-bought bonsai, which is not a tropical, may live two-three years inside, but not much longer. It needs the winter season of dormancy to live any length of time. A pine bonsai should not be indoors any longer than three days. Most indoor bonsai shows only last three days because of this. Second, bonsai must be watered daily, give or take, depending on the size of the tree. Small bonsai (6" or less) have to be watered two to three times a day in 90°+ weather. Remember, they are in very small pots with a well-drained soil that dries out quickly.

Next, is protection from winter cold. Many species of trees can be used as bonsai, but not all are acclimated to the area where they are being raised. Around the Chicagoland area, tropicals must be stored inside, (above 60°), in a well-lighted environment. Semi-hardy bonsai, which need a moderately cold climate, are stored in a 32°- 42° environment. For example, an enclosed back porch with a space heater at a low setting keeps the roots from freezing. Remember, tree roots do not naturally grow above ground



A formal upright spruce. To hold the branches in place, each is temporarily wired. Some thicker branches require guide wires.

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level in a pot. Hardy bonsai can tolerate extreme cold and actually need the cold to survive. These trees can be stored outdoors in a wind free area with a little mulching -again to protect the roots. When available, piling on a little snow acts as an added insulation from extreme cold.

When spring comes, the hardiest of bonsai are moved from winter protection areas and arranged on benches. A few weeks later, the semi-hardy come out and take their place on the benches. When temps are 50°+ at night, the tropicals take their turn. In late fall and early winter it happens all over again, but in reverse order. Everything goes back to its respective winter protection area.

My collection includes about 75 bonsai specimens. Most of my collection has been acquired from home landscapes and bonsai workshops over a span of 25 years. If someone I knew was ripping out a landscape, I would ask to look around to see if there was anything with bonsai potential. I would dig it out and put it in a nursery container for a year or two,-maybe longer, to recover from the transplanting. I would then decide how to finish the tree in one of the many bonsai styles.

My trees are like pets, they are an everyday constant. To some this may seem laborious, but to me, tending to my collection year after year, and seeing it get better and better, is very cool.

Please visit my website, www.mybonsaiheaven.com to see the rest of my collection. **-OC**



My fenced in car port where I keep my collection.

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