

The Art of Bonsai



For success in the art of bonsai, an understanding of the plants' basic needs is the first step. If you've had success in general gardening, you are likely already prepared to take on this project. Learning how to train the plant into the desired form is the next step. The goal for bonsai is to grow and design a young tree so it replicates a much older, more mature version of itself.

There are many trees that make suitable bonsai specimens. Some growers even gather seedlings from the wild to train into a miniature forest. Obtaining a plant from the wild requires additional care as more extensive root pruning is often required in addition to transitioning the tree into the appropriate container. Purchasing a bonsai plant from a reputable garden center is the best, and usually least expensive, approach for those who are new to this hobby. Local plants are typically less expensive than more exotic species that have to be ordered and shipped. If the plant does not survive, it may be disappointing, but it is not as costly to start again. The grower is able to learn through trial and error without having to worry as much about making mistakes due to cost.

A juniper bonsai is a great low maintenance, hardy starter plant. Ficus saplings are a bonsai option found in many garden centers. They will hold onto their leaves year-round and are commonly grown as houseplants. Not all trees are suitable for bonsai. Trees with large leaves, such as sycamores, will look disproportionate if grown in miniature form. Though the leaves may become smaller with multiple years of restricted root growth, they will still be too large for the design. Some shrubs can be grown as bonsai as well which is an option to explore with experience.

Choose a shallow container with a drainage hole to grow your bonsai. There should be enough space in the container to accommodate the plant roots, but not much more space than that. Use a potting media with good drainage. Concave pruning shears are recommended for training bonsai trees because they allow close cuts without leaving a collar (stub) on the trunk.

Experienced bonsai growers often work with wire to train their plants. There are about ten basic styles for shaping bonsai trees. The two upright



Mental Health Monday

styles (formal and informal) are recommended for beginners since they are easiest to create and allow the grower to learn techniques. With experience, growers may experiment with cascading and slanted styles which force the trunk to turn at different angles.

The roots and shoots of a bonsai should be about equal. Obtaining this ratio may require pruning, but avoid heavy pruning which will create additional plant stress.

Plants grown as bonsai are usually outdoor plants. They can be grown as houseplants, but will require more light than a typical houseplant. With the limited amount of soil available in a bonsai container, it will likely need to be watered multiple times each week. Some growers prune out leaves to reduce the amount of transpiration of their miniature plant. Bonsai trees will need to be fertilized during the growing season. Nutrition needs vary among species as well as age of the plant, but in general a balanced fertilizer applied according to package recommendations is adequate.

Bonsai is a hobby that can grow with you as you develop your skills. It can be a life-long hobby that supports positive well-being. Look for a bonsai club near you to turn this into a social endeavor.



Do you have a bonsai plant? Email us at cdom@ksu.edu if you have a story to share.

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