

HOW TO GROW BONSAI



Bonsai (bone-sigh) literally means 'plant in a tray'. There's evidence that the art of bonsai is 1500 years old in China and 700-800 years old in Japan. Initially trees that had been stunted by nature were collected and potted. As those trees became harder to find, suitable plants were propagated for bonsai. To create the image of age, the trees were pruned, wired, roots were exposed, limbs and wood were made to look dead, trunks were hollowed, all to make it look old. The beauty of bonsai does not have to be the actual age but its apparent age. The pleasure of bonsai is to be able to view in your own backyard what appears to be an ancient gnarled tree, or a huge forest that you could walk through.

Outdoor Bonsai Care

Outdoor bonsai are made with outdoor plants and must be kept outside. They can be displayed indoors for short periods of time (day or two) but must not be left to dry out.

Winter Protection

Winter protection is necessary for outdoor bonsai. You must become familiar with the specific varieties of bonsai you have to determine if protection (or how much protection) is required. There is always a danger of earthenware pots cracking during freezing spells so you may decide it is easier to protect all your bonsai during the winter. They can be stored in an unheated garage or unheated greenhouse. Cold frames are also good. Sometimes setting them close to your house is protection enough to keep them from freezing. A thick mulch around the pot is good protection. Do not put an outdoor bonsai in a heated house for the winter.

Watering

Watering is best learned from experience. No one can tell you exactly how often to water your trees. During the summer months you will most likely be watering at least once a day. During the winter our rain fall may be enough. To determine if you need to water, feel the soil and dig down in the pot a ways. If it feels dry - water. When you water be sure to water thoroughly enough so that all the soil is wet and water is running out the bottom of the pot. If you can't seem to get it wet set it in a tray with water up to the pot rim and let it soak up from the bottom. To keep moss, gravel and soil from washing away - use a watering can or watering wand on your hose that gives you a fine, wide spray.

When to Fertilize

Fertilize during the plant's growing season (usually April through October). Water with Al's water soluble fertilizer or equivalent.

Repotting

Repotting should be done when the roots completely fill the pot, this may take one or a number of years. The length of time varies with different trees. Watch the drainage holes for roots and/or gently remove the tree from the pot to inspect the root ball. Your tree may have been wired into the pot so check the bottom of the pot to see if there is a wire that needs to be cut.

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Spring, just before new growth starts, is usually the best time to repot. Cut away approximately 1/3 of the root mass from the sides and bottom and then add fresh soil when putting it back in the same pot or a new one. Be sure to use soil that drains well and doesn't stay soggy wet or become rock hard.

Pruning and Wiring

Pruning and wiring is done to maintain or change the shape of your bonsai. It is very relaxing and rewarding to spend time improving a bonsai you are particularly fond of and see it develop over the years. There is no trick to wiring or pruning – it is very easy once you learn the basic guidelines. Books, workshops, clubs, friends are all good ways to learn.

If your new bonsai has wire on it watch it closely and remove the wire before it scars any branches or the trunk. Wire is left on anywhere from a few weeks to a full growing season depending on the type of tree and how vigorous it is.

How to start & maintain your own bonsai are subjects addressed in detail in many books. It would be very difficult to go into any more detail here. Whether you collect a wild specimen, buy a nursery plant, or buy a completed bonsai, books are a great way to learn 'how to'.

Indoor Bonsai Care

Because indoor bonsai are never really dormant, their care differs some from outdoor bonsai.

Placement

Placement in your home should usually be in a bright spot with plenty of light and away from hot and cold drafts. Direct, hot sunlight may be a problem for some plants, determine this with each variety.

Watering

Watering is very similar to outdoor bonsai. You have to learn from your own bonsai how often to water. Feel the soil, if it is dry - water it thoroughly enough to soak all the soil. Water should be running out the bottom drain holes. The atmosphere indoors is usually dry so bonsai benefit from misting or being placed on top of a tray filled with gravel. Water is then kept in the gravel and evaporates around your bonsai.

Fertilizing

Fertilizing is the same as outdoor bonsai. Be sure to dilute your fertilizer to half strength.

Pruning and Wiring

Pruning and wiring is the same as outdoor bonsai. Indoor bonsai may tend to get a little more 'leggy' than outdoor bonsai because of the lower light level. If you notice this you may want to try placing your bonsai in a brighter spot indoors.

Repotting

Repotting is done when your bonsai becomes root bound the same as outdoor bonsai.