



Kokedama: Moss Balls and String Gardens

The art of kokedama evolved by combining three aspects of traditional bonsai: *nearai*, *shitakusa* and *kusamono*.

- *Nearai* literally means “root-wash” and is a step in preparing for the repotting of bonsai. It has come to mean a plant which has been pruned and grown until tightly root-bound in its pot, and then removed completely from that pot for display. The roots and their soil mass maintain their shape when taken out of the pot, sometimes having been washed to fully expose the interlaced roots. They are displayed on shallow trays or plates.
- A *shitakusa* is used as a balancing element to the focal point of a bonsai display. Each is a miniature arrangement of wild grasses, ferns or flowers which represent the season and, to some extent, the location of the tree that is featured. *Shitakusa* add an ephemeral aspect to the longevity of the larger bonsai. The plants are presented simply on a mound of moss-covered soil in a shallow ceramic or wooden dish or tray.
- *Kusamono* have a similar aesthetic, conforming to the seasons and giving the impression of place, but are larger and become the central focus of the display. They are usually displayed on a mat, board or flat tray.

When the elements of these bonsai techniques are combined – the pot-less style of *nearai* bonsai and the natural, herbaceous style of *shitakusa* and *kusamono* – you can see the origins of kokedama or moss balls. Hang them up with twine and a pulley and you’ll have your own String Garden. Here are two kokedama methods, instant and traditional:

Method 1:

For a larger plant with an already established root system, you can make an (almost) instant kokedama.

- Remove your plant from its pot and shape the rootball into a round, orange-sized ball. Soak sheet moss in tepid water and squeeze out excess. Wrap the rootball entirely with small pieces, covering it all the way up to the plant crown.
- Tie a loop of twine around the “equator” of the ball and then wrap it around in every direction to secure the moss.
- Immerse the kokedama ball – not the plant – completely in tepid water for about 5 minutes, remove and let drain.
- Make another loop of twine and hang your kokedama as a string garden or display it on a dish. Indirect light is best.
- Soak once or twice a week, depending on the humidity of your home and the type of plant you have chosen.
- Add water-soluble fertilizer at half-strength to your soaking water every two to three months.

Method 2:

For smaller plants with more delicate root systems, this traditional method is more durable and may last longer.

- Gently shake the soil from the roots. Wrap them in a small amount of moist sphagnum moss and then wrap a short length of cotton thread around this to keep the roots in a cylindrical, finger-like shape.
- Mix seven parts peat moss with three parts *akadama* (bonsai soil). Make it moist enough to shape into a solid ball.
- Poke a hole in this ball of soil that correlates with your plant’s cylindrical root mass and gently insert the plant.
- Lightly press the hole closed around the crown of the plant.
- Proceed to wrap in sheet moss and twine as instructed above. Display and care instructions are also the same.