

# Bonsai Information

From

## The Houston Bonsai Society

Bonsai is a rewarding and fulfilling pursuit that can provide many years of artistic expression, a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, camaraderie with other practitioners, and can teach patience, love of nature, and calmness of mind. Attached is some useful information on Bonsai, answers to frequently asked questions, and some frequent misconceptions.

The Houston Bonsai Society is dedicated to the promotion of this art through its monthly meetings and workshops, special events, the Fall and Spring Bonsai exhibitions, the Study Group, and by bringing in speakers from around the country to demonstrate their particular view of and talent for bonsai. We hope that you will join our Society and become an avid practitioner of this ancient art with all of the benefit that it brings to our fast-paced and stressful culture.

### SOME FACTS REGARDING BONSAI

1. Bonsai is pronounced, “bone-sigh” which means, “tree in a pot”, not banzai which in Japanese means “ten thousand years”.
2. Bonsai originated in China approximately 2,000 years ago and was introduced into Japan by Buddhist monks in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. The first exposure the Western world had to bonsai was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Japanese brought some trees to show at an exhibition in England. It was first brought to the United States after World War II by returning soldiers.
3. Bonsai can range in size from a few inches to four feet tall and can be acquired through collecting in the wild, in your or your neighbor’s yard, or in nurseries.
4. Any woody perennial plant with small enough leaves can be trained as a bonsai, even herbs such as rosemary.
5. Most bonsai are outdoor plants and typically do not survive extended stays indoors, particularly during winter, since they require the cold to go dormant. Some tropical plants, such as ficus, can be trained as indoor bonsai since they do not need a winter.
6. “How old is that bonsai?” is a typical question from someone first exposed to bonsai and is really not as important as the answer to the question “How old does it look?” The illusion of great age is the goal and does not always require the tree itself to be of great age.
7. The bark and trunk are what impart age to a tree, not the foliage.
8. A bonsai is planted in “soil” not “dirt” and is typically planted in a pot made for the purpose usually made out of clay with drainage holes in the bottom.

### SOME COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

1. Bonsai is not a species of dwarf, “fuzzy” trees that live a long time – you cannot buy bonsai seed. Bonsai is the name of the art used to keep trees in a miniature form. People say, “This is a bonsai” because the tree is in a pot or tray and has been maintained in its miniature form using this technique.
2. Bonsai is not an expensive pastime. Some trees collected from the wild and/or worked on for a long period of time can cost many, many thousands of dollars. However, for the average practitioner, relatively inexpensive material can be acquired at nurseries or their own yards and can provide great satisfaction.
3. Bonsai are not mistreated or “tortured” as some people think. The only way to maintain a tree in a shallow tray or pot is to treat it very well – fertilizing, watering, and pruning. Practitioners see their trees every day and take meticulous care of them. Practices like wiring, creating dead wood, and root pruning are not damaging to the tree when done correctly and only enhance the beauty and quality of the tree.
4. Bonsai are not only created in Japan. Anywhere and anytime that a practitioner uses these techniques to create a tree in a tray or pot in miniature form, a bonsai has been created.
5. Not all bonsai are small trees. Some can get as tall as four feet. Often trees of great height, 15-20 feet, are cut down in size and used to create much smaller bonsai. This gives the practitioner a large range to choose from. Some will find they like the tiny bonsai that can be held in one hand, and some will find they like the large ones that take two people to carry. It is all determined by the nature of the practitioner. You are going to create and work with that which you love the most.
6. Bonsai are not hard to do. As with anything people do, it can get quite sophisticated, but is not really hard to do. What appears hard to the newcomer watching a demonstration is not hard for the person demonstrating because of their experience in this art. With practice, the newcomer will soon be doing what they thought was so hard. It is all a matter of level of sophistication, time invested and experience.

### SOME COMMON MISTAKES

1. Forgetting that bonsai are three-dimensional. Since many beginners often start this practice from a book, they base their trees on the pictures they see in them which are two-dimensional. Don’t forget that your trees also have back branches used for depth.
2. Lack of strong rootage and/or good taper to the trunk.
3. Fertilizing and/or watering too much or too little.
4. Trees that have been styled like a hedge with a flat top to the apex, or very pointed and triangular trees that show youth and immaturity.
5. Wiring that is crossing or not securely anchored.
6. Lack of pruning so that the interior of the tree cannot be seen.
7. Attempting to manipulate a tree into a style that is poorly chosen for that species of tree.
8. Keeping bonsai inside the home for extended periods. Most trees are outdoor trees and should be kept outdoors. Some tropical species should be kept inside or in greenhouses during the winter since they require warmth all year long.
9. Repotting or root pruning at the wrong time of the year. “Everything has its time and season” is one of the key lessons learned in bonsai.
10. Pruning off too much rather than too little. More branches can always be taken off if necessary, but none can be put back if they have already been cut off.

### BONSAI STYLES

A bonsai is a miniature of a tree in nature. Bonsai styles have been developed to represent the different ways trees grow in nature. Not all trees can be grown in all styles, but should follow the styles that most closely match their natural growth habits. These styles are useful for all trees grown as bonsai, conifers, deciduous, flowering, fruiting, etc.

**There are five basic styles with some variations:**

**Formal Upright** – These trees have a very straight trunk with the apex (the top of the tree) directly above the base of the tree. The shape of the tree is typically triangular and branches on either side of the tree are roughly equal in length as you move up the tree. This tree can require more skill to do correctly than some other styles since mistakes in the trunk and branches are readily spotted.

**Informal Upright** – This tree, like the Formal Upright, has its apex, for the most part, over its base. In this style, however, the trunk will typically have some curves in it unlike the straight trunk of the Formal Upright.

**Slanting** – The Slanting style can have a straight trunk or curved trunk, but what typifies this style is that the apex is no longer over the base, but rather off to one side. These trees tend to look like they have been blown off vertical by the wind, or the earth sank on one side tilting the tree. These trees can show a lot of motion since they sometimes look like they are falling.

**Semi-Cascade** – These are trees that emulate those on the sides of cliffs or mountains where the majority of the mass of the tree is hanging over the edge of the cliff or growing down the side of the mountain. A Semi-Cascade tree does not hang below the bottom level of the pot.

**Cascade** – These are the same as the Semi-Cascade except the tree extends below the bottom level of the pot.

**In addition to these five basic shapes, there are variations that fall into several other categories:**

**Broom** – These trees have an upright trunk with branches growing up and out with foliage in a fan or umbrella shape.

**Windswept** – As the name implies, these simulate trees growing where the wind blows in one direction for most of the year forcing the branches and foliage to grow with the wind in one direction. Often trees such as this are found on beaches, cliffs, and mountains. The trunk is often leaning in the same direction.

**Driftwood** – These trees are found where conditions are very harsh, such as on cliffs or mountains where winds are high, snow is deep and heavy, and dry conditions or hurricanes may prevail. They epitomize survival under very difficult and stressful conditions. Typically, a large portion of the trunk has died with only a small vein of living bark to feed the foliage that remains.

**Exposed Root** – The idea is that as a tree grows the solid is washed away through erosion and, after some time, exposes the roots. These roots then harden to form an extension of the trunk, which happens when roots are exposed to sun and air.

**Literati** – Considered by some the first bonsai to be kept and trained long ago, this tree has only a couple of guidelines – a long, thin, interesting trunk with a minimum of branches and foliage. It is a somewhat esoteric style guided more by a philosophy than guidelines.

**Trees also come in multiples:**

**Twin and Triple Trunks** – As the name implies, two or three trunks growing from the same base.

**Clump** – Many trees growing from a single base.

**Forest** – Many trees growing in a pot, but not from the same base.

**Raft** – emulates a tree that has fallen to horizontal and those branches that remain on the upward-facing side of the trunk now become trunks themselves.

**Sometimes trees are not planted in pots, as such, which leads to the following variations:**

**Root Over Rock** – These are trees, like the Exposed Root style, that grew on a rock which was then exposed due to erosion. This leaves a tree on the top of a rock with the roots extending down the sides of the rock to the soil. These styles are planted in a rock with the roots in the soil.

**Root On a Rock** – There are a couple of ways this style can be created:

1. A tree can be planted on a flat slab of rock with the soil mounded on top or on a slightly curved version of a slab, which holds the solid a little more easily.
2. A tree can be planted in the natural, or carved, fissures of a rock and often simulates the solitary cliffs found off the coasts of Japan and China. These usually stand in shallow trays in sand or gravel. Unlike the Root Over Rock style, the roots of these trees do not extend into the tray but are planted on the rock itself.

## SELECTING PLANT MATERIAL

Plants for bonsai are often purchased from nurseries, either regular garden nurseries or those exclusively for bonsai. The other way is to collect trees. This can be done in your own yard, or a neighbor's with their permission, by lifting bushes or little seedlings that are not wanted. Some beautiful bonsai started their lives in someone's yard or were saved from bulldozers tearing down an old house. Some practitioners have the chance to go into the swamps, mountains, valleys, or plains of the country and collect material. Some of the finest trees are found this way, but collecting in this manner is not always an option for some people.

**How ever you get your tree, there are some basic things to look for:**

**Trunk** – The trunk is the most important part of the tree, above the ground, and is the first thing to look for. Seek out those trunks that have good taper, the width from the base to the apex decreases smoothly and gradually, and interesting shape and bark texture. The trunk should be as thick as possible for the style you have in mind, and should be clean of as many defects as possible such as large pruning scars.

**Branches** – There should be a number of branches so that you have ample to choose from when styling your tree. Avoid trees where the growth is only far out at the tips. Look for trees that have sufficient inner growth.

**Foliage** – The condition of the leaves can usually tell you the condition of the tree. So look for trees with robust foliage. Look also for trees with smaller leaves. This assists in creating the illusion of a larger tree.

**Roots** – along with the trunk, the roots, more than anything else, help to establish the illusion of age and size needed in bonsai. Look for good roots that appear to grip the ground. This is called the root buttress. Often the buttress is below the soil level, so you may need to dig down a little to determine if there are sufficient surface roots. A beautiful tree without a good root buttress is only half a tree.

1. Check the “reject” or “bargain” sections of nurseries for trees that others may not want (such as the Back Forty at Teas). Often people are looking for landscaping material that does not suit bonsai needs just as we are looking for material that does not suit their landscaping needs.
2. Wait for sales during the early fall and get your trees at greatly reduced rates. Often you can get trees for 50-70% off.
3. Check out the Houston Bonsai Society's auction held a couple of times each year. This is a great opportunity to get trees culled from other people's collections that have already been worked on to some extent.

**Here is a list of some good bonsai candidates you might find in local nurseries:**

Juniper	Firethorn	Black Pine	Japanese Maples	Japanese/English Yew	Bald Cypress
Boxwoods	Elms	Dwarf Yaupon	Oaks	Holly	Serissa
Ficus	Wisteria	Azaleas	Quince	Crepe Myrtle	

There are many other possibilities, so don't be afraid to experiment and try those trees that catch your eye. Remember, you are practicing this art for yourself, so don't be inhibited. Go out there and grow what makes you happy.