

Bonsai Tree

To many people the word bonsai brings to mind a stunted tree or plant which is left to grow in a tiny container. The expression bonsai actually consists of two Japanese words: "bon" meaning a shallow container or tray, and "sai", a plant or planting. But bonsai is not the art of stunting a tree's growth, rather it is the art of growing plants in a confined space to create a piece of nature in miniature. While it is a Japanese word and the whole practice is firmly rooted in the Orient, you will find bonsai plants all over the world.

While bonsai is usually linked with Japan, it originated in China. It began as early as the eighth century. In oriental cultures, art brings order to the everyday world, therefore bonsai fits in very comfortably as an art form, bringing nature into balance and scale.



Bonsai plants can actually be any tree or shrub grown outdoors. Some plants seem to be more suited to it than others. The most common plant you will see as a bonsai is junipers, since they are easily pruned and trained. But if you have ever visited any large bonsai collections such as the one at the National Arboretum in Washington, DC, you will see everything from blooming cherry trees, to azaleas, quinces and redbuds, to elms, maples and birch trees.

Upon seeing one of these outstanding collections, or even one beautiful specimen, many gardeners are eager to own one. But a basic understanding of the plants, the culture and care should be taken into consideration before purchase.

Do you want to grow your own, or purchase one someone has trimmed and trained for you? Many nurseries now offer a selection of bonsai plants for purchase. Older, well-established bonsai will carry a hefty price tag many times, and if you are new to bonsai, expect some trial-and-error results. Even the most experienced bonsai growers have an occasional fatality. So, I wouldn't opt for a pricey specimen your first time out. Start with something reasonable, or try your hand at growing and training your own.

One common mistake many people make is considering a bonsai an indoor houseplant. Most bonsai plants are outdoor plants, and need to be kept outdoors. With very few exceptions, if you grow a bonsai plant inside it will die. Choose a location for your plant outside and leave it there. You need to give it considerations as to light and winter protection.

Once you have chosen a plant for bonsai, look at its natural light requirements. For instance, a juniper can grow in full sun, as can a redbud or a birch tree. But full sun in the summer will be too intense for a plant growing in such a small container. Give it full morning sun and filtered light during the hottest times of the day. Daily watering will be necessary for almost all bonsai plants in the summer. More bonsai die from poor watering practices than from any other problem. Shallow containers dry out much more quickly than those in large containers or planted in the ground, and the type of soil can determine how long they retain moisture. On the flip side, watch out for too much water especially heavy rains which can waterlog the pots.

Container size and type are another option.