



Indoor Bonsai

With all the available resources to choose from, entering the world of Bonsai can be somewhat daunting. Scratch the surface with an exploratory internet search and you will find conflicting opinions on just about everything to do with creating and maintaining a bonsai tree. The subject of this tip sheet, *Indoor Bonsai*, is a case in point – some traditionalists will tell you there is no such thing! While the art of bonsai is usually created using temperate species that prefer to be outdoors and need a winter dormancy period (Junipers, Maples, Pines, Spruce, etc.) many gardeners would like to create and care for a bonsai tree year-round inside their homes. On the following two pages we have collected information specifically on plants that work well indoors because they are tropical or subtropical, are usually available, and have characteristics that lend themselves to the art of bonsai.

tropical and subtropical bonsai trees

While many of the listed selections are well-known houseplants, there are a few elements of care which change slightly when they are in formation as bonsai trees. If you keep these in mind, your plant will remain healthy and happy as you shape it into the form you have chosen.

- Bonsai is often called plant sculpture and in order for a plant to evolve into a beautiful piece of art, it is helpful to think of it as being “in training.”
- Training involves manipulating the trunk and branches of a bonsai start through periods of pruning and/or pinching, intensive growth, wiring, root pruning and re-potting.
- You may go through several rounds of each of the above steps (and not necessarily in that order!) before you even place your bonsai into a bonsai pot. A bonsai start needs to reach certain dimensions – especially in trunk thickness – before it goes into a shallow bonsai pot.
- The job of the pot is to slow down growth in order to reduce leaf and twig size so that your miniature will have the correct proportions and give the impression of great age.

caring for your indoor bonsai tree

During training, a bonsai start will need regular watering and feeding, correct lighting and the appropriate temperature. Specifics for each plant are listed on the next page, but remember:

- Monitoring water needs is a high priority. Bonsai soil is coarse and quick-draining. Water from above, not by submerging the pot. Water should flow out of the drainage holes each time that you water. Humidity is another factor in plant health and using a humidity tray is advisable for many indoor bonsai.
- When in the process of building up trunk and branch diameter, fertilizing is essential. Choose a mild fertilizer such as Espoma Grow! (2-2-2) or Nature’s Source (10-4-3) and follow the feeding tips in the comment section of the table on the next page. As with most houseplants, reduce fertilizing during the low light of winter months.
- Correct amounts of light will keep plants from becoming leggy and is a way of controlling internode length so that your tree will have proper proportions.

Enjoy your bonsai start in your home while it is in training. Having it near you will inspire you to think about what your goals are in shaping your bonsai.

creative shaping – a brief introduction

The most important job in caring for your bonsai is also the most fun! Go to a bonsai exhibit, join a bonsai society, look at photos in books, and read up on the different bonsai styles and “rules” online. You will be amazed and inspired and then...begin to plan how *your* bonsai will look! Here is a brief summary of shaping techniques:

- Pruning: to change the direction of a branch and begin to shape it, cut back to a bud aimed in the direction you want the branch to go.
- Pinching: to give a branch ramification (twiggy) by removing the tip of the growing branch (usually the last two nodes of a three node shoot), interrupting apical dominance and making the lower buds open. These buds will form new branches.
- Wiring: to further shape branches by wrapping them with wire in a coiling pattern. The wire is curved into the desired shape and trains the branch to grow in that shape. Branches may also be pulled in a desired direction and held in place by plant stretch tie anchored in the pot.
- Root Pruning: to help build up and form the nebari (trunk flare), and to prepare the bonsai to live in successively smaller pots, large roots are removed to give preference to the surface roots. Every time roots are pruned, the top of the plant must be pruned as well.

favorite indoor bonsai selections

| Botanical Name | Common Name | Light | Water | Comments |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|--------------|---|
| <i>Arborecola arboricola</i> | Schefflera/ Umbrella Tree | Part Sun | Medium Moist | Develops fast; feed regularly; pinch to encourage branching; repot annually |
| <i>Bucida spinosa</i> | Black Olive | Sunny | Medium Moist | Feed frequently; pinch new shoots; natural growth is bonsai-like |
| <i>Carissa grand</i> | Natal Plum | Part Sun | Dry | Strong plant; feed every 2 weeks; fast grower; prune/pinch regularly; easy |
| <i>Carmona microphylla</i> | Fukien Tea | Part Sun | Medium Moist | Difficult; feed every 2 weeks; style by pruning; fine branch ramification |
| <i>Ficus benjamina</i> | Weeping Fig | Low to Part | Moist | Great for beginners ; makes air-roots easily; leaf prune; protect from drafts |
| <i>Ficus microcarpa</i> | Banyan Fig | Part Sun | Moist | Fast-growing; tolerates heavy pruning; thick round leaves; formal upright |
| <i>Ficus salicaria</i> | Willow Leaf Fig | Part Sun | Moist | Grows rapidly; feed frequently; pinch constantly; prune and wire anytime |
| <i>Podocarpus macrocarpa</i> | Chinese Yew | Part Sun | Dry | Slow growing; feed every 2 weeks; needs extra iron and magnesium; cut back hard to increase branching |
| <i>Portulacaria afra</i> | Jade Tree | Sun | Dry | Fast growing; heavy feeder; prune frequently to maintain shape; wants tight feet - delay root pruning |
| <i>Serissa foetida variegata</i> | White Star Serissa | Part Sun | Medium Moist | Fast grower but fussy; feed every 2 weeks; needs repeated pruning |
| <i>Syzygium paniculatum</i> | Eugenia/ Brush Cherry | Part Sun | Medium Moist | Vigorous grower; feed every 2 weeks; can be pruned back hard; easy |
| <i>Ulmus parvifolia</i> ‘Catlin’ | Catlin Elm or Chinese Elm | Part Sun | Moist | Fast grower; easy ; feed 3 times a year; takes heavy top pruning and pinching |

we highly recommend...

The St. Louis Bonsai Society whose members are gracious with their help and guidance – <http://www.stlbonsai.com/>