

## **BONSAI BASICS**

I have called this talk Bonsai Basics because in the time available I can only scratch the surface of a subject which as you delve into it becomes even deeper.

I will say before we go any further that I am not a bonsai master, although I do think of myself as a bonsai artist.

I first got into bonsai about 30 years ago, when I started growing some seedlings. Things were a lot different then, we did not have many books or clubs we could get information from, and when I think of some of the ideas that were around it does make me cringe a bit.

The seedlings did not survive long nor did my interest in bonsai, and it was about another 10 years before I had another brief foray into bonsai. This time I did join a club and found a few books, but again it did not last too long.

Then about 8 years ago I was looking for a Mothers day present and I bought my Mother a bonsai.

Then I left it behind and had to buy another one for her.

That meant that I had a tree and I had to find out a bit more about it and so my interest was rekindled.

I went to a bonsai nursery, and bought another tree, and well you know what happens when you have two, they multiply and quickly became 3 then 4 and so on.

I joined the Salisbury society, and bought a book, and found a lot of info on the internet.

I started going to courses at Shepton Mallet, and the number of trees I had quickly multiplied.

Today I have about 90 trees in various stages of development.

I am still learning, I am doing a regular course with Japanese master Nobuku Kagiwara which is very enlightening.

# History

So let's move on to the history of bonsai, when did it all start? Where does bonsai have its roots?

There are some who would have us believe that the Egyptians were the first, also India, but the main consensus of opinion is that bonsai began in China probably around 3000 years ago.

The monks who went around the countryside to try to heal people, took various herbs with them, and needed to keep them alive and they started to put them in pots or other containers.

This eventually became trees and then they were shaped.

The Emperors took the idea, and soon they were growing larger trees and had gardeners to look after them. And lookout the gardener who killed a tree, he was liable to lose his head. Penjing became a status symbol of the rich.

Around 800 years ago the Japanese started to go to China, and took back with them amongst other things silks, Buddhism and Penjing, which they called Bonsai.

The Japanese started to put their own mark on the trees they were growing, and also used different species which were native to Japan.

The first time that Bonsai was seen in Europe was at the Great Exhibition in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> c., and they were labelled as Japanese Miniature trees.

Bonsai did not get going in the UK until after the second war, when people started to grow trees and clubs were formed.

The problem was that there was very little information available on how to grow or style the trees.

It was not until the 1950's that books were appearing, and more growers had experience of Bonsai.

In the USA there were many Japanese who had emigrated there between the wars and took Bonsai with them.

Today there are about 70 clubs and also a number of professionals as well as nurseries to cater for the many Bonsai growers in the UK.

## WHAT IS BONSAI?

Bonsai is literally translated as a tree in a pot, but this is not a bonsai. There are a number of requirements for a tree to be called Bonsai.

Bonsai is about an image that the artist is trying to give, as you would have with a painting, and as with the painting, the container is as important as the tree in shape and size, like the frame of the painting it must enhance and not detract from the tree.

The tree has to appear to be older than it really is, it may be windswept, on the edge of a cliff and clinging on for dear life. **WABI**

It may be a tall majestic pine, it may have dead branches where it has been struck by lightning or the trunk is half dead and the tree is clinging to life with just a small amount of live wood. **SABI**

There are 5 basic styles of Bonsai,

First is the **formal upright**, this is as it suggests a straight trunk tapering to the top with branches each side and back.

The informal upright is as the name suggests a trunk which has a curve or curves with again a tapering trunk.

Next is **Broom** style, straight trunk with the branches mainly looking upwards.

Next is **semi cascade** as the name suggests the trunk and branches flow outwards and slightly down, the difference between semi and cascade is the point at which the tip is either above or below the bottom of the pot.

**Windswept** has all branches flowing in one direction as if blown by the wind.

**Literati** is a tall slim tree with few branches, in a generally round quite small pot for the height of the tree.

Groups can be from two trees up, although 2 is called twin 3 is called triple trunk. 4 is never be used and should always be odd numbers up to say 11, then no one would trouble to count.

There are many other styles from these main ones, another popular one is root over rock and also root on rock.

Note here the word Should, as someone said “rules are for guidance laws are made to be broken”

## **Sizes**

Bonsai come in a number of sizes from Mame to king size but that is not too important at this stage.

The choice of pot is linked to the size and style of the tree, and is a very important part of the overall composition. Most Conifers should be in unglazed pots and most Deciduous in glazed pots especially flowering species.

## **Where to find Bonsai**

I would not advise anyone starting out to buy a so called indoor bonsai from a garden centre or worse somewhere like Lidl's or another supermarket. They will be imported from Holland usually, and in poor health, and if they have been in the shop for a few days very dry and probably at death's door.

Even in the garden centres they tend not to get watered properly, and they will also be overpriced, so you have been warned. It is better to pay a bit more for a tree that is going to live.

I have seen a tree in a local garden centre priced at £145 which I would not pay £5 because of the condition it was in.

### **Where do you find trees or material to use?**

There are a number of ways to start,

First and slowest is from **seed**. This can take anything from 5 years upwards, but is thought to be the best way. I don't have that kind of time to wait, so what other ways are there?

Next then is **Cuttings**. Most species will root from cuttings, either soft or hardwood, again it is a bit slow, but much quicker than seed. Depending on the size of the cutting, from a year up.

**Air layering** is a good way to get a head start, again, most species can be air layered, or ground layered also. The time to do this is in late spring around early to mid May.

**Grafting** is another method, but where do you find the material?

I go to garden centres a lot for good sized trees for working on.

Another way is to buy from a Bonsai dealer either starter material, or partly finished trees, they will of course cost more than the garden centre stock.

And they will also have finished trees but again a lot more money than trees which are not finished.

One method of finding suitable material is to collect from the wild. If and I do not advocate doing so you are able to obtain permission to dig a tree from the wild, then you must do so at the correct time of the year. November to March is the time, and you must have the biggest root ball you can dig out plant in a large box or pot and with some of the soil it was in. Then look after it for at least 3 years before doing anything to it.

You **MUST** have permission to dig it is an offence to do so without, and it would also be a very good idea to have someone with you who is familiar with collecting like this.

## Species

What are the best species to use?

It might be easier to ask what not to use.

I would not use Sycamore, or Horse chestnut, although it can be done it is not easy, and also silver birch. After that, almost any species can be used.

Box is very good, also cotoneaster they both have very small leaves.

Maples are one of the most popular species also Hornbeams are great. Oaks and Beech, Chinese and other elms, most conifers are also good, Scots Pine, Mugo Pine, and Yews are good. Junipers too, and Cedars  
Azaleas and small flowered Magnolias and flowering cherry are good flowering species to try.

If you want a fruiting tree, avoid normal apple and plum species, use Crab Apple, the reason is that whilst you can reduce the size of the leaves it is not possible to reduce the size of fruit or flowers. Another plant which can be used to good effect is the small flowered fuchsia, there are a number of species and they do look very good, however, I must stress that in pots they are not hardy.

## **TOOLS**

These are the tools I use, I have accumulated them over the last 8 years as the cost of buying all at once would be a lot of money.

Side cutters knob cutters wire cutters root hook tweezers scoops chopstick etc.

## CULTIVATION

The most important part of cultivation of bonsai is watering. In Japan an apprentice takes three years to learn how to water. If the watering is not correct then the tree will suffer and not grow into a good bonsai. Some species need more water than others but they all need water, and the correct amount. I always water with a rose on the can or hosepipe, and I soak all my trees and then go back and do it again. Early morning is the correct time of day to water. The roots can absorb the water and use it to make food with sunlight, if watering is done in the evening then the roots will not take the water and will remain cold and wet until the following day and could cause rotting.

Water on leaves does not cause burning. The main cause is drying out of the rootball so that the tree gets very dry and has nothing left to transpire. If there is water at the roots the leaves do not burn. By late in the afternoon the pot will be drying out, and as the temperature drops the roots have air around them and will be able to grow.

**Feeding**, is a misnomer, we do not feed any plants let alone bonsai, we provide the material for the plants to convert into food that can be used. If the tree is not in good health then feeding will do no good, and possibly harm.

Organic is best, and I use Biogold which is a solid that dissolves with watering over a period of weeks.

**Repotting** is a very important part of looking after the trees. Depending on the species and age of the tree, repotting is done every 2 to 5 years or more. About 30% of the rootball is removed and the tree put back in the same pot, or a more suitable one if that is needed. The time for repotting is from February to March for Deciduous trees and April for Conifers. Some conifers can also be repotted in August to September.

Position in the garden is important, many species need full sun, many need protection from sun and wind. Acers especially the red leaved varieties like Desojo, must be shaded from the sun in summer or they will burn quickly, most conifers can be placed in dull sun.

I protect my trees from rain in winter and exceptionally cold, frost. Most species we grow are hardy to -8C.

### **Composts.**

There are probably as many different compost mixes as there are growers.

Everyone has their own favourite and will stick to it.

The materials we use mainly are Akadama, Kyodama, Kiryu Pumice Composted Bark Sphagnum Moss.

## STYLING

When first styling the tree you should find the front. Sometimes it is easier to find the back then the front seems a bit more obvious.

First branch is on the left, next on the right a little higher, and third is to the back.

If the tree is informal then no branch should be on the inside of the bend, each higher pair of branches should be a bit shorter than the lower.

This is a very simplistic explanation as we do not have the time to go into greater detail.

We can wire branches to reposition them and there are several ways to use the wire.

The wire we use is anodised aluminium, copper is also used but is much more expensive.

I will mention now, that there are many books on bonsai, also dvds and internet help sites.

Also clubs, I am a member of ABBA, Wessex and a founder member of Blackmorevale Bonsai group.

The main magazine is Bonsai Focus.

There are a number of bonsai nurseries around the country, Herons Bonsai in east Sussex is good, also Dai Ichi Bonsai at Hermitage near Newbury. Mendip Bonsai is at Shepton Mallett.

INTERVAL