

Meet the man behind British bonsai: 'I let the trees tell me what they want'

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Bonsai: the curious little tree that could

Credit: Alamy

- [Christopher Middleton](#)

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At first glance, you could get the wrong idea about John Trott. With his long, streaked hair, he looks more rock 'n' roll than rock garden. But although he appears to be a “horticultural headbanger”, he spends most of his life out of sight.

Despite being one of the biggest names in British bonsai, Trott does much of his best creative work at home in Somerset. He operates within a tiny bungalow garden, barely 50yd long, with a small polytunnel and a work shed. Just like his plants, he can flourish in a restricted space.

Over the years, Trott has won 90 gold medals for his work, yet his premises remain largely invisible. It's no secret why that is; the labels on some of his prize specimens go from £195 up to £850, and a whole array of security devices guard his tiny crops.



John Trott with a Chinese juniper Credit:

Christopher Jones

In the hushed, miniature world of bonsai, big certainly is not beautiful. [Bonsai](#) is the art of growing artificially dwarfed varieties of trees and shrubs in pots. Given free rein, many of Trott's specimens – hornbeam, elm and pine, for example – would grow to standard, spreading-branched stature. That they remain just two or three feet high is thanks to his daily ministrations – pruning, shaping and applying tiny strips of wiring to restrict growth.

Even the most modest gardener might like to see their plants soar to [impressive heights](#), but the art of the bonsai-grower is quite the reverse: to restrict plants to inches, rather than feet. The philosophy behind the art is to create a miniaturised but realistic representation of nature in the form of a tree. You can enjoy the results close-up, rather than from several paces back, craning your neck.

Delicate touch

Watching Trott at work is an education. There is no large-scale soil mulching or hole-digging. Rather than five-foot-long spades and forks, Trott uses tools that would fit the hands of a pixie. His task is to keep tiny leaves pruned, disciplined and as well groomed as a [Crufts](#) show dog.



The tools required for top class bonsai work Credit: Christopher Jones

What's more, he works non-stop in spreading the bonsai gospel. As well as being a regular exhibitor at shows up and down the country, Trott runs courses, helping bonsai beginners get a feel for the craft. Instead of encouraging his pupils to hack away at huge branches, he instils the delicate art of snipping off a leaf that is heading in the wrong direction.

It's not as if he is of miniature proportions, either. You might think, to look at him, that he was committed to the traditional British skills of chopping and chainsawing. Yet here he is, in the middle of Somerset, dedicated to the art of growing miniature trees – an art that originated in about AD 700 with the Chinese, and was later adopted and developed by the Japanese.

Trott started growing bonsai trees in 1969, when he was working at Clarks, the local shoe factory, and hasn't looked back.



The wiring around a Japanese bonsai tree

Credit: Christopher Jones

“It’s a delicate business,” he says, peering at some microscopic foliage. “You have to keep on top of what’s going on. If you let a plant get too dry, it just shuts down, and you’ve lost it. This means there’s a lot of watering needed, at least once a day, more often in warm weather.

“What you learn early on is that however much work you put into a tree, you never really finish. Because the tree is always evolving your work never stops.”

Branch off

Instead of measuring a tree’s age by its height, Trott is guided by the tiny marks on the end of each branch; roughly one nodule is the equivalent of one year’s growth. But it’s not just mini-mathematics that determine a tree’s beauty. The art of beautiful bonsai-growing lies in the removal of branches that are sprouting in non-aesthetic directions.

This requires not the gung-ho lopping-off of unsightly stems, but the delicate excision of one or two superfluous leaves – not so much gardening as microsurgery.



John Trott with a crab apple tree Credit:

Christopher Jones

He concedes, of course, that this kind of horticulture is not to everyone’s taste. Although most gardeners are renowned for the amount of time they spend on their own, Trott’s work requires monkish care of his leafy charges, which he intersperses with attendance at rowdy horticultural shows, where he champions the bonsai cause to one and all. It is, he agrees, a somewhat unusual path for a [British gardener](#) to follow, and every 10 years or so he travels to the Far East to catch up on the latest bonsai news.



John Trott prunes a Chinese Elm Credit: Christopher Jones

“It all began when I used to go to a Japanese teahouse, when I was about 15,” he says. “Although bonsai started out in the Far East, we very rapidly caught up in this country with what the Chinese and Japanese were doing.”

Over the years, British bonsai gardeners have learnt to apply the rules of growth-restriction to familiar garden plants. It’s just as common for Trott to be called out to treat a cotoneaster bonsai as anything from the Far East.

“Not, of course, that this is a quick turn-round business. You don’t just bang out hundreds of daffodils each year and bank the profits. It can take anything up to 25 years before a prize bonsai tree can become saleable,” he adds. The good news is that the list of British bonsai growers isn’t large .



John Trott with a satsuki azalea Credit: Christopher Jones

Often, the solution for a below-par bonsai is simple (frequently, the plant is too near a radiator and is drying out). Sometimes, though, he has to dig deep down into his 45 years of experience to suggest a cure.

Trott doesn’t just specialise in trees. He is always looking out for containers. “You’d be surprised how often the pot plays a big part,” he says. “When I see a good pot, especially a

Chinese one, I always make a point of buying it. The pot in which you plant your bonsai has a big effect on its long-term health; they need to have drainage holes, too.

“Also, the British climate is important. I’ve been at shows where the marquee has blown down, where the ground has flooded and I was once at [Hampton Court](#) in the middle of a heatwave.

“The secret, though, is not to rush in with an instant solution. After so many years, I tend to step back a bit and bide my time. I watch, I listen and I wait. In the end, I know it sounds strange, but I let the trees tell me what they want.”

John Trott is based at the Mendip Bonsai Studio in Shepton Mallet, Somerset, but also runs bonsai courses around the country (01749 344274; mendipbonsai.co.uk).