Introduction to Bonsai

What Are Bonsai?
by Brent Walston – www.evergreengardenworks.com

The simplest definition for bonsai is a plant in a pot. But bonsai is so much more than a tree treated like a houseplant. It is plant art, or sculpture to be more accurate. Bonsai require skilled care to survive and to blossom into magnificent specimen plants.

Many nurseries and vendors sell inexpensive plants in pots and call them bonsai. With care they could become bonsai, but they are not bonsai. On the internet we have the adopted the term 'Mall Bonsai' or 'mallsai' for these plants. Some of these people are true bonsai folk and do their best to see that your plant survives by giving you at least basic care instructions. Sadly, other vendors could care less. We recommend that you do not purchase bonsai from persons unwilling or unable to give you care information.

Bonsai are not houseplants. For the most part they are outdoor plants and must remain outdoors all year long. This is because most bonsai are temperate climate plants that require a period of dormancy. This is true for evergreens such as juniper as well. There are also indoor bonsai, but these are usually limited to tropical and subtropical species, and even these species are happier outside in the summer. Since the roots of outdoor bonsai are exposed, they must be carefully over wintered in cold climates to prevent the roots from reaching killing temperatures.

Little bonsai do not become big bonsai. They are grown under training conditions until they reach the desired size and trunk thickness and are only then transferred to bonsai pots. Plants grow very slowly once they are in bonsai pots, that is the object of the pot, to slow down growth to reduce leaf and twig size. Most of the inexpensive (and some not so inexpensive) mall bonsai have had little or no training whatsoever. This is why we do not consider them to be bonsai. Trees must be carefully trained to achieve the beautiful shapes most people associate with bonsai.

The training of bonsai is done mostly by manipulating the trunks and branches through pruning and wiring. Anyone can learn how to do this with a few hours of basic instruction from a teacher or by reading books. Of course, advanced skills are honed over a period of a lifetime, and the more your practice, the more you will learn.
Bonsai must be root pruned and repotted occasionally. Since the object is to keep the tree the same size, they usually go back into the same pot after root pruning. Root pruning is also a training technique and a plant may be invigorated or slowed down by timely pruning. The trees are repotted with fresh special soil designed specifically for bonsai. The most important quality of bonsai soil is that it drains very much faster than usual potting soils.

Bonsai must be fertilized regularly while actively growing. This is most easily achieved by fertilizing with a good soluble fertilizer every two weeks. Use a fertilizer with trace elements such as Miracid or Miracle Grow at the full strength recommendation. Bonsai soils are not very good at holding nutrients, so regular full strength feeding is a must.

Watering improperly is probably the most common problem for beginners. Plants must be watered thoroughly when they become slightly dry. Watering should be done from the top, not by submerging the plant, and they should be watered until they are saturated. You will see water pour from the drain holes when they receive enough. This method of watering helps to prevent salt buildup in the soil.

Determining when a plant is slightly dry can be tricky. We recommend that you lift the pot (if it is a small bonsai). There is a substantial difference in weight between a well watered bonsai and one that needs water now. You will learn this 'feel' very quickly. You can also dig your finger down about an inch into the soil. If it is dry to this level, it should be watered. Another method, recommended by Michael Persiano, is to insert a chopstick into the soil as sort of a dipstick. Leave this stick in the soil and pull it out periodically to test the water 'level'. If the soil has adequate water the stick will be damp.

Most people in hot summer areas find that watering is necessary every day when the temperature is above 80F. Sometimes, watering is necessary twice a day. In general, indoor plants require less frequent watering than outdoor plants.

Many great articles on specific bonsai topics can be found at: www.evergreengardenworks.com

The characters that make up the Japanese kanji for bonsai can be translated in several different ways which include "to grow", "plant" and "tree" in a "tray", "container" or "pot". Often misunderstood in the west, bonsai is the art of creating an idealized image of a tree using living plant material. Different horticultural, trimming and shaping techniques are used to create the appearance of old trees found in nature. The art of bonsai originated in ancient China but during the twentieth century has spread throughout the world. The goal of the Midwest Bonsai Society is to teach the art, care and cultivation of bonsai, and keep the tradition alive in Chicago and the midwest.
Bonsai Clubs and Organizations

To further your knowledge of bonsai, it is suggested that you become a member of a bonsai club to help further your studies in the art of bonsai. It is impossible to tell someone everything that they need to know about bonsai in one session, so club participation is a great resource.

The Midwest Bonsai Society – www.midwestbonsai.org

The Midwest Bonsai Society's goal is the promotion of bonsai in general, and specifically the cultivation of a growing public awareness of bonsai as a living art.

To further this goal the Society holds monthly meetings at 7:30pm on the first Monday of the month at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, IL. Prior to each meeting (7:00pm) on most months there is a Bonsai 101 course where beginner bonsai topics are discussed.

The Society hosts two shows annually, one in May and one in August; these shows are some of the top shows in the nation. Centered around the bonsai courtyards at the Chicago Botanic Garden, they include demonstrations, workshops, national vendors, a banquet and individual member trees on display.

Prairie State Bonsai – www.prairiestatebonsai.com

Meetings are 7:30 PM on the 1st Wednesday of each month, February to December at the College of DuPage (COD), Glen Ellyn, IL. Visitors are welcome. At least one presentation or demonstration at each meeting, often from visiting Bonsai masters. Demonstration trees are raffled at the meeting.

Their next show is:

Saturday/Sunday, September 29-30, 2012 ANNUAL PRAIRIE STATE BONSAI SHOW  Hours: Sat.-Sun.10am-4pm, at the Morton Arboretum

American Bonsai Society – absbonsai.org

Founded in 1967, the American Bonsai Society, Inc. is the pioneering national bonsai organization. As a non-profit corporation, our purpose is to promote knowledge of and interest in bonsai and to serve as a national focal point for bonsai fanciers. We publish a Bonsai Journal, hold conventions for our members and provide a variety of educational and support services to the bonsai community. While we focus on North American bonsai, we respect our historical "roots", and we welcome international members.

Our members are committed to improving and developing talent. We hope to help you develop your skills.
BONSAI RESOURCE LIST

In the Chicago Metropolitan Area

The most common question that I am asked is where you can buy bonsai in the Chicago-land area. Here is a list of resources that I’ve found. There are no dedicated bonsai stores in Chicago, and the best bonsai-specific shopping is still found at MBS’s shows in May and August at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

A few comments in advance:

• If you are a beginner, I do not recommend buying bonsai in the period from October 15 to April 15. It is very difficult to keep them alive during that period. This is due to watering problems, insect problems, fungus problems, and potential heat and light problems.

• Bonsai are usually trees that are kept small through training, trimming, and confined root systems. Bonsai are not just potted plants.

• Bonsai found at “big box stores” are typically glued into their pots with rocks on top. Please be aware of this, and if you choose to buy one take the rocks off immediately when you get home. The combination of glue and rocks is typically deadly to bonsai, and these trees will not live long.

• Bonsai trees may be classified as tropical, semi-tropical, or temperate zone (hardy). They should be treated accordingly. All bonsai should live outdoors from April 15 through late September. Temperate zone bonsai trees should live outdoors throughout the year. If that is not possible, you might consider looking for tropical or semi-tropical trees.

The following list has been arranged alphabetically:

B. C. BONSAI Bonsai starters – hardy and tropical- $15 to $300
10 year old trees. No tools or pots
Beck -630/690-0404

CHALET NURSERY 3132 Lake A v. Wilmette, IL -847/920-8200
Some trees, tools, soil. Quality of trees is weak. Price is high.
EXCELLENT NURS

GESTHEMANE GARDEN CENTER 5739 N. Clark St Chicago, IL 773/3878-5915
Tools (as a sales person display), Soil, Pots

THE HIDDEN GARDENS 16W 658 Front age Rd. Hinsdale, IL 630/655-8283
Bonsai, Pots, soil tools OPEN DEC. -APRIL
LURVEY'S GARDEN CENTER
7411 Jean Bragton
EXCELLENT NURSERY STOCK

VERN GOERS GREEN HOUSE
630/323 -1085 (Dan Kosta)
pots – no tools

Suggested Reading List:

Bonsai by Harry Tomlinson
Sunset's Bonsai book

Classes at the Chicago Botanic Garden:

Ivan Watters, Curator of Bonsai at the Chicago Botanic Garden holds classes three times a year. The series starts with his beginners course and works up through to an advanced level course. Information can be found at:

http://www.chicagobotanic.org/school/