

Bonsai Exotique

Bonsai Care & Maintenance

Introduction

The term 'bonsai' is Japanese for 'tree on a tray' or 'potted tree'. This ancient horticultural art is believed to have originated over two thousand years ago, in China, and was brought to Japan sometime after the 8th century CE by Buddhist monks. Throughout Asia today, bonsai is recognised as a serious legitimate art form. It is interesting to note that, since 1934, the longest running annual bonsai show in Japan, called the Kokufu-ten Exhibition, is held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, not at a botanical garden. Bonsai is popular with people who love to commune with nature but may not have the space or the time to devote to keeping large gardens. In addition to its decorative qualities, making and keeping bonsai is a relaxing counterpoint in our fast-paced and electronic gadget-obsessed society. Watching a bonsai grow and develop over many years can be very satisfying and knowing they can be passed on to future generations is a profound and sublime wisdom. The art of bonsai is now practised worldwide throughout Asia, Europe, South Africa, Australia and the Americas, often using trees indigenous to those areas.

Like any potted plant, bonsai trees require simple but routine care. The difference between a topiary or potted patio/specimen tree and a bonsai is that a bonsai is a tree which has been extensively shaped and artistically styled over many years to look like a tree found in its natural environment, only miniaturised. In China and Japan, there are bonsai which have been officially recorded as being many hundreds of years old. Sadly, they can be killed in minutes by neglect or carelessness. For, despite their exquisite statuesque beauty, bonsai are not inanimate objects but living organisms, living sculptures which grow and develop with nature's seasons and respond to human artistry and care. While some particular species of trees might require very specific care environments, the following principles are a general guide.

Location

Bonsai should be thought of as ordinary trees living under extraordinary conditions, designed to shape and miniaturise them. Bonsai are totally dependent on the care and micro-environment they are given by their owners. As a general rule, bonsai trees must live outside most of the time. No one would seriously try to grow a pine tree in their living room or on top of their office computer, though we have seen some try! Like nearly all plants, bonsai need sunlight in order to photosynthesise – an energy conversion process essential for their survival. Ideally, most bonsai prefer sheltered outdoor locations which receive morning to midday sun although different species of trees can tolerate different levels of exposure. For example, Japanese maple leaves are delicate and are easily burnt by harsh Australian afternoon summer sun and so need some protection while Port Jackson figs are tough and can stand full summer sun all day! One should aim to create an appropriate environment for your particular species of tree and generally avoid locating your bonsai in dark, wet locations or hot dry windy places. When bonsai are temporarily brought indoors for display for a day or two, they should never be placed directly in the path of air-conditioning or heating ducts, which are big killers of most indoor plants, because they quickly dehydrate them. No amount of subsequent watering, wishful thinking or argument will resuscitate a dead tree. When indoors, bonsai should be placed in naturally, well lit and ventilated spaces. Think of the old English Manor-house shaded glass conservatory as a model. But, avoid locations where they might be burnt by scorching afternoon sun shining directly through windows which magnify the heat, particularly in summer. A little common sense goes a long way and we are happy to advise you on these matters.

Watering & Fertilising

You need to be aware of your bonsai needs at all times - if the weather is dry, hot or windy, extra watering or protection may be required. All trees should be thoroughly watered every morning in spring and summer. In addition, in the hotter months, totally immersing your bonsai in a sink of water once a

week can also be beneficial. In autumn and winter, watering may be reduced to every third or fourth day depending on the specific conditions of your bonsai environment. It is very important not to let the soil totally dry out but it is equally important not to let the soil become waterlogged, as the roots may rot. Bonsai love natural rain when available. Liquid or solid fertiliser is generally applied once every few weeks in spring and summer to boost natural plant growth. Only use a strength and type suitable for your tree.

Pruning and Repotting

Bonsai generally receive their major branch and root pruning when they are being repotted, usually in late winter or early spring before leaf buds open. This is partly to help shape the tree but also to help keep a balance between the root system's ability to sustain the leaf canopy the tree will develop. It is vitally important that potting soil should be very free draining and the correct ph type for your species of tree. Garden soil and most commercial potting mixes are fundamentally unsuitable for bonsai. We produce and sell our own specialised free-draining soil mix which is high in grit and crushed rock.

Diseases and Bugs

Fungal root and foliage diseases can generally be avoided through regular re-potting in fresh soil and by maintaining an appropriate environment for your particular species of bonsai. However, most prunus trees, gardenias, azaleas and roses may require chemical treatments to control black spot and leaf curl. Gardening reference books can help here or seek advice from a specialist. Root eating insects such as Christmas beetle larvae can be removed during re-potting. Foliage eating insects such as caterpillars and snails can be addressed by vigilant observation and then physically removing the culprits. Sap sucking insects such as aphids and scale can be simply brushed off or scrubbed away using soapy water and an old tooth brush. Chemical applications to control diseases and parasites should only ever be resorted to when all else fails and only after consulting a specialist, as they can sometimes do more harm than good and almost always involve hazardous compounds to human health. Of course, sometimes despite the best care and attention one can give, a bonsai might simply die. Well, at the risk of stating the obvious, death comes to all living things at some time and all one can do is try to learn what might have been done better next time and move on.

Bonsai Services, Lessons & Help Line

Bonsai Exotique provides full pruning, shaping and repotting services. We provide on-site assessments for bonsai suitability and a range of maintenance services. We provide one-on-one tuition so you can learn how to make and care for your own bonsai. We also provide 'holiday care' and emergency services if your tree needs specialised care, but please telephone in advance to make an appointment. Please check our website for updates and more information.

Company Policy

It is our policy to only provide the best grown, healthy and properly prepared bonsai for sale. We pride ourselves on our consulting and after-sales service and recognise that it is in our ethical and commercial interests to provide the best products and professional services to our clients. However, once a bonsai leaves our premises, we have no control over its destiny and one should be mindful that it only takes several minutes in an oven-hot car while shopping to sign a bonsai's death warrant. With a lifetime of experience, we have seen it all and heard some amazing stories, but just like any pet owner, every bonsai owner has total responsibility for the care and wellbeing of their own trees.

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Bonsai Nursery at Beowulf Galleries
23 Queen Street WOOLLAHRA NSW 2025
tel: 02. 9362 5583 fax: 02. 9362 5586

e.mail: beowulfgalleries@ozemail.com.au web: www.bonsaiexotique.com.au