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- 6 Swamp cypress, c. 1969, h 115 cm
- 7 Trident maple, c. 1948, h 80 cm
- 8 Chinese juniper sapling bonsai starter, c. 2001, h 15 cm
- 9 Japanese maple sapling bonsai starter, c. 2002, h 15 cm
- 10 (opposite page)
Fig over sculpture, c. 1988, h 67 cm

bonsai techniques used subsequently. Like the trees themselves, bonsai styles and techniques are constantly evolving. Likewise, the variety of trees used in bonsai has dramatically increased with the spread of bonsai practices throughout the world. In Australian

bonsai, indigenous species such as Ficus (native figs), banksias, lilly pilly and casuarina are now being used alongside the traditional pine, prunus (e.g. apricot, cherry) and maple.

Practice

Trees used for bonsai are rarely dwarf varieties but are grown within a restricted space and kept small by regular root and branch pruning. Aesthetically, they must give the impression of having grown in their natural state without human intervention. Plants used as bonsai must exhibit all aspects of natural growth including ageing, with

branches of varied thickness, tapering gracefully to the apex. Small leaved trees such as juniper, elm, pyracantha and maple are popular.

Display

The total composition aims to have an overall balance, stability, proportion and beauty. To appreciate a bonsai, the viewer needs to observe and understand a wide range of elements, such as the way the roots emerge at the soil line, the appearance of the trunk, the texture of the bark and impression of age. Consideration is given to the artistic arrangement of the branches, the shape and density of the foliage, seasonal changes, variations in colour and shape of the blossoms or fruit. There are many styles ranging from formal upright, slanting, cascading, twisted, wind-blown, exposed roots or root over rock, single or multiple trunks or group plantings, usually in odd numbers – three, five or more. Most bonsai are styled in an asymmetric shape with an isosceles triangle-like silhouette and in most cases, planted off-centre in the pot.

A formal style is angular and dignified; for example, a pine with an upright tapering trunk and evenly distributed branches. An informal style might represent a savagely storm-damaged tree on a rocky crag or the gentle elegance of a tree



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grown in a protected glen. Like art in general, new artistic bonsai styles are emerging all the time.

The containers

The bonsai container serves a similar purpose to the frame of a painting: to enhance the main subject, provide a sense of stability and not distract attention from the tree. Though there will always be exceptions to the rule, pines and evergreens tend to be planted in terracotta or charcoal-coloured unglazed pots while deciduous and flowering varieties are often put in colourful glazed pots. Pots can vary in shape and size from a few centimetres to bathtub size! While most bonsai pots are mass produced and relatively inexpensive, antique and custom-made bonsai pots are collectable in themselves and may add hundreds or even thousands of dollars to the value of the tree. Pat Kennedy, a potter from Adelong near Tumut, NSW, specialises in making ceramic pots for bonsai.

Care

If properly cared for, bonsai can live several hundred years and many outstanding specimens are revered for their age as much as their aesthetic qualities. Since bonsai are grown in containers with limited space, they need regular watering and should never be allowed to dry out. Potting soil must be free draining to prevent root rot, and the soil should be the correct pH (acid/alkali) for the species of tree.

All bonsai should spend most of their lives outdoors but be protected from climatic extremes. Air conditioning and central heating are the enemy of bonsai and of plants in general. Bonsai require morning sun for photosynthesis to happen.

Bonsai should be regularly re-potted, usually in early spring, and have their roots pruned to prevent becoming pot bound. Tree branches are pruned both to shape the tree and to balance the root system's ability to sustain the leaf canopy. The combined process and relationship between soil type, watering, fertilising and root and branch pruning is the horticultural science of bonsai.



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Prices and investment

The difference between a bonsai and an ordinary tree in a pot is that a bonsai is a tree which has been extensively shaped and artistically styled over many years to look like a tree as found in its natural environment, only miniaturised.

You are paying for artistry, skill and age when purchasing a bonsai. A mass-produced sapling in a pot, sold as a 'bonsai starter', might be 5–10 years old and cost \$25–\$125 but is not yet a real bonsai. Unless imported, most bonsai grown in Australia are less than 60 years of age as the bonsai phenomenon only really took off after the war.

An imported 80-year-old tree or prize-winning specimen by a recognised artist could fetch \$20,000 to \$30,000. Some especially rare bonsai have sold in Australia for \$50,000, though bonsai in overseas markets have fetched millions. You can expect a well-shaped bonsai, at least 15 to 20 years old with well-defined

root system and a tapering trunk wider at the base than the top, to cost anywhere between \$300 and \$1,000. Avoid trees scarred by wire marks or bad pruning, trees with no trunk taper (unless a sapling), trees decorated with figurines to disguise the fact they are only saplings or vendors who will tell you anything, like 'bonsai can live indoors', just to sell you a tree.

The bonsai industry is unregulated so it is advisable to shop around, speak to the bonsai artist and look at their work, check their credentials or track record and ask what follow-up and support services they provide.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Bonsai clubs can be found in all states and many regions of Australia. Many clubs are listed at www.zeta.org.au, and others will come up if you search the Internet for 'bonsai club australia'.
- Photographs and technical information for this article were supplied by Thor Beowulf from Bonsai Exotique of Queen Street, Woollahra, NSW, 02 9362 5583.