

Arts

Bonsai

Tiny trees, big dollars

Collectors have found a new must-have item, reports Lyndall Crisp.

Real estate's gone through the roof, shares have gone through the floor. You can't afford a painting by a fashionable artist and that French armoire in the antique shop window is beyond your wallet.

So what's a good buy that these days will give pleasure and appreciate at the same time?

Believe it or not, stunted trees — or, more precisely, bonsai. Private collectors are paying about \$5000 and up to \$20,000 for them.

Interior and garden designers are treating them as a serious art form. Advertising agencies and movie producers are featuring them. And the Art Gallery of NSW will, for the first time, display 15 exquisite examples as part of its *Seasons: The Beauty of Transience in Japanese Art, From Autumn to Winter* exhibition which opens on September 26.

"They are becoming an appreciating asset," says Thor Beowulf who curated the bonsai part of the exhibition and has been growing them for 30 years. "I have a Japanese white pine here that belongs to a client — they bring them back for re-potting — that he bought for \$2000 a couple of years ago and has tripled in value."

He says the trend to inner-city and apartment living had encouraged a huge growth in the popularity of



Thor Beowulf says the trend to apartment living has led to an increased interest in bonsai.

Photo: MICHELE MOSSOP

bonsai. "Bonsai are increasingly being recognised as collectable and tradeable commodities," he says.

Bonsai, meaning "tree on a tray", originated in China 2300 years ago. What distinguishes them from other pot plants is the skilled pruning and shaping involved.

Beowulf is doing brisk business exporting to the US bonsai grown

round a miniature statue and costing from \$2500.

While the most expensive bonsai — they can be as much as 100 years old — would be imported, principally from Taiwan, the locally grown varieties are increasingly popular. Pine, prunus, banksia, Port Jackson figs and many other Australian natives (but not eucalypts

which are too temperamental) can be cultivated as bonsai.

"Any tree that can stand having its foliage and roots pruned can be bonsai," says Beowulf who sells through his Sydney gallery. "The whole purpose is to create a miniature of that particular tree."

The Australian Associated Bonsai Clubs represents 46 clubs and about

3000 members around the country. Beowulf invited the president, Lee Wilson, and two other professional growers, Megumi Bennett and Ray Nesci, to show their prized bonsai in the AGNSW exhibition.

Wilson, of Tricolor Bonsai Nursery in Sydney, says cult movies such as *The Karate Kid I and II* had made bonsai popular with young people. "The older the bonsai, the more valuable it is," he says. "I've known them to sell for up to \$10,000 in parts of Australia. In Asia, they change hands for hundreds of thousands of dollars."

He says although people begin growing bonsai as a hobby, it often becomes an addictive science. "Then their collection turns into a valuable asset."

He sells young plants, about three years old, for about \$30, but older bonsai sell for about \$3500.

If they are cared for properly, their value will certainly increase, says Bennett, of Imperial Bonsai Nursery, who advises owners to keep them out of sight of burglars.

"I sell about 30 bonsai a month, mostly in the \$40 to \$280 range, but some as high as \$4000," she says.

Like precious paintings and antiques, the oldest and most valuable bonsai are catalogued.

Most are in collections that have been in families, or in the care of temples, in China and Japan for generations, some dating back 1000 years. But buyer beware. Cheap bonsai sold at local markets can be nothing more than a cutting stuck in a pot.