

Bonsai

A quick guide to growing and caring for bonsai indoors



Bonsai originated in China in about 200AD. The Chinese were the first to miniaturize trees and plants, possibly due to transport of medicinal plants in containers by healers. These were called pen jing, or “tray scenery”. The practice spread to Japan in about 900AD and has been very popular ever since.

Bonsai translated directly means “container planted” or “tree in tray”. Many people associate bonsai with dwarfing and shaping trees into a living sculpture. It is this and more – true bonsai recreates nature in a miniature form. The shaping part, whether done by wiring or trimming, is the artist’s prerogative.

A Bonsai is not a dwarfed plant, but a plant that is kept small by means of pot confinement, root and foliage pruning. Some plants are better suited for this than others. The plant should look as natural as possible.

If the bonsai is to be grown indoors, a tropical or subtropical plant (Ficus, Schefflera, etc) will do best. Outdoors, temperate to alpine (Conifers, Maple, Larch, elm etc.) do best, and will require a dormancy period of 6 to 10 weeks of below 45°F.

Some bonsai grow to be hundreds of years old, handed down from generation to generation. You can start your own tradition by using a starter tree. These trees are usually about 2 to 5 years old and have been started either by seed or cutting and have been shaped and pruned to achieve a specific form.

At a Glance

Temperature: Research your plant’s native habitat and try to mimic temperature & climate.

Light: Most need at least 2-4 hours direct or lightly filtered sunlight daily.

Water: Allow top 1/3 of soil to dry before watering; mist leaves daily.

Fertilizer: Every other watering; half-strength; during active growth; water-soluble, all-purpose 20-20-20 or organic fertilizer; do not feed in winter.

Trimming/Shaping: Control growth with seasonal pruning, weekly or biweekly pinching. For tall, leggy growth, snip where you see smaller leaves on the inside of the branch.

Temperature

A good way to keep a bonsai happy is to duplicate the plant’s natural night and day temperature. This information can be found in books and online. Tropical plants will not do well with nighttime temperatures under 45°F. Some trees, if kept outside, will require protection from the elements in the winter depending on the tree’s ability to adapt to the climate. Cold frames, unheated spare bedrooms, garages, and enclosed patios can be used. You can try putting the plant in an oversized container (wood box, cooler etc.) and mulching around the pot up to the first branch, or burying in soil with the root system below the freeze zone.

Light

Light requirements depend on the plant, but most trees and shrubs require at least 2 to 4 hours of direct or lightly filtered sunlight depending on the exposure and intensity of the light. Dappled light (sun/shade or lathe house all day) is the same as about 4 hours of morning or afternoon direct sun. Be careful not to burn the leaves

if your particular plant is not accustomed to direct sunlight. Introduce the plant to sunlight slowly. Conversely, if the plant “stretches” (or becomes “leggy”) toward the light, it is not getting enough light and will need to be moved closer to a light source.

Water

Because of the compact nature of their pots or trays, watering can be challenging. Shallow containers will limit the expanse of the root system, which can make watering an art in itself. While some species can handle short periods of dryness, others need constant moisture. Watering too frequently inhibits oxygenation of the soil, and will keep the soil soggy, promoting root rot.

Intense sun exposure and wind can quickly dry a bonsai to the point of drought, so soil moisture must be monitored at least once daily if outdoors. The soil should never go “bone dry”—even for short periods. The foliage of some plants, including junipers, won’t show outward signs of drying or damage until long after the damage is done, and may appear green and healthy despite having dead, dehydrated roots. A good general rule is to allow the top 1/3rd of the soil to dry before watering. The specific variety of plant, soil conditions, sunlight, and airflow dictate how long this will take, which is why checking the soil for moisture with your finger or a moisture meter before watering is crucial. Careful attention should be paid the first few times you water until you familiarize yourself with the plant’s needs.

When you water, submerge the whole pot into water so the crown of the plant is completely covered. Soak for a few minutes until bubbling stops. Leaves should be misted daily.

Fertilizer

Bonsai need to be fed far less often than other houseplants. Use any water-soluble, all-purpose 20-20-20 fertilizer or organic fertilizer only during active growth. Fertilize about every other time you water, at half the manufacturer’s recommended strength.

Trimming, Pruning, and Shaping

Miniaturizing of the tree is maintained via pruning of both the foliage and the roots. Different methods are used for each variety of plant depending on your particular plant’s budding habits. Seasonal pruning or even weekly/bi weekly pinching will need to be done to control growth. Monitor growth, and if any growth appears tall or leggy, snip it back near smaller leaves on the inside of the branch.

Improper pruning can weaken the tree, especially if pruned during the wrong time of the year (particularly with subtropical and coniferous trees). Wiring with copper or aluminum can be done in the spring to early fall to hold branches in place until it maintains a desired shape. Check monthly to be sure the wire isn’t gouging the flesh of the stem. Remove the wire by cutting it away in small pieces rather than unwinding. Keep in mind that some plants are too brittle for wiring, and shaping them will need to be done entirely via pruning.