



Frequently Asked Questions About Bonsai

Practiced for centuries in China and Japan, bonsai is the reproduction of natural tree forms in miniature. Bonsai trees are living miniature trees which increase in beauty and value as they mature over the years.

How often should I water my bonsai tree?

Unlike a houseplant, bonsai trees use a "free draining" type of soil because their roots cannot tolerate "wet feet". In addition, they are grown in significantly less soil and, therefore require more watering. Factors such as tree location, temperature, lighting conditions, quantity of soil used, and the changing seasons will determine the frequency of watering. You can get to know when your tree needs to be watered by observing the foliage, testing the soil with your index finger just below the surface, or just by the weight of the pot. (The drier the tree, the lighter it will feel.) To take the guesswork out of watering, we recommend an inexpensive moisture meter which works very much like a thermometer. Insert it into the soil and the movement of the needle will tell you if it is time to water.

How often should I fertilize my bonsai tree?

Because bonsai trees are cultivated in limited amounts of soil, adequate feed is very important. As a general rule, a small amount of feed is given in the spring and a larger amount in the fall. Feed for bonsai should contain three principle ingredients; nitrogen, phosphoric acid, and potash. It is also a good idea to use a fertilizer containing "chelated" iron. Water before fertilizing your tree and then apply at half the strength recommended by the brand's manufacturer. We rotate the use of brands since different manufacturers add different amounts of trace elements and minerals. We also add Superthrive which is a vitamin supplement to our fertilizer mix. You may find it simpler and easier to use slow release fertilizer granules (placed over the soil) whose nutrients are released with each watering.

How often should I mist my bonsai tree?

All trees grow in more humid conditions than our homes, offices and dormitories. So what can we do to provide this essential humidity? Misting the tree is only beneficial for a short time, so what we recommend is to place the tree on a humidity tray and add water to the tray. As the water in the tray evaporates it creates a humid environment around the tree 24 hours a day. When the water in the tray is gone, add more water. It's a good idea to separate the pot from the water in the tray by adding some pebbles to the bottom of the tray. This will prevent any roots from sitting in the water.

How much sunlight is required for my bonsai tree?

Sunlight, especially the ultra-violet ray, affects the growth of trees. Therefore, except in special cases such as immediately after repotting, extensive trimming, etc, bonsai should be placed in a sunny location. Bright light will also work well but the tree should not be placed more than 12" away from the direct light source. An east, west or southern exposure works best. A northern exposure will require the use of "grow lights" which should remain on up to 16 hours each day and the lamp should not be more than 2 inches from the top of the tree. Incandescent light is too hot and will not provide the various spectrum of light that is required to maintain your bonsai tree. If you do not have a window or light source that provides an east, west or southern exposure, be sure to select a bonsai tree that does well in lower lighting conditions.

How is miniaturizing a tree possible?

No one single technique is adequate to make a tree small. The fact that the tree is grown in a container, the trimming, pruning, repotting and other care given the tree -- all contribute to the final result of limited growth. Dwarf trees are often found in a natural environment, but in bonsai this environment is provided artificially. Bonsai are grown in shallow containers the size of which determines the amount of soil the roots are able to grow in. This environment definitely restricts the growth of the roots and its functions.

How do I trim and prune my bonsai?

The main objective of trimming and pruning is to shape the bonsai into the desired form and to reduce growth above ground in order to maintain a balance with root growth. The process of shaping begins when the tree is very young and is on-going as it continues its growth. Trimming is accomplished by using a sharp scissors or shears. This traditional tool is called butterfly shears or bonsai shears and is used for removing foliage and light branches. When heavier branches are removed, we call it pruning and the tool to use is the concave cutter, for which there is no substitute. The concave cutter allows you to remove small, medium and even large branches without leaving any visible scars. Some trees such as the Juniper should be trimmed by using the thumb and index finger to remove new growth and to prevent browning and a "sheared" appearance.

How do I prevent diseases and insects from infecting my bonsai?

As living trees, bonsai are susceptible to insect attacks and disease. Preventive and corrective measures include (a) keeping your bonsai in good health, since insects and bacteria tend to attack weak trees, (b) giving your tree ample light, fresh air and ventilation, (c) keeping the soil free of spent blooms and fallen leaves etc. You may also use an insecticidal soap spray which is not harmful to humans or animals. This soap derivative, however, may require more than one application to control the insect population. It's also a good idea to use this spray weekly to prevent any attacks.

How do I train my bonsai?

Wiring, a relatively modern method of training bonsai trunks and branches into the desired forms, has become commonly accepted. It is often used in place of, or in conjunction with the traditional methods of long-term pruning and hemp-rope binding. Copper wire that has first been annealed in a low-temperature fire is preferred. After it has cooled, it is wrapped around the branches in the direction the branch is to be bent. The branch should be bent once into its final position so as not to harm the cambium layer under the bark. The wire should be wrapped taut, but not too tight, and should be removed just before it bites into the branch -- between 6

and 12 months. The wire is removed with a bonsai wire cutter by snipping the wire at each turn, thereby allowing the cut pieces to fall to the ground. Never unwind the wire or use pliers to cut the wire, since this will damage the branches.

What is bonsai soil and why is it used for bonsai?

As noted previously, potted trees do not do well in soil that is always wet. Potting soil and top soil are heavy soils that can remain wet for weeks. Bonsai soil is a mixture of ingredients which allows the water to drain freely and at the same time, retain moisture. In addition, the ingredients allow the roots to breathe air and prevent compaction. There are two basic types of bonsai soil -- a conifer mix and a tropical/sub/tropical mix. Before adding any soil mixture, be sure to cover the drainage hole(s) with screening to prevent the soil from washing out of the pot. When re-potting, it is always best to use the soil mixture in its dry state.

How often should I re-pot my bonsai tree?

All potted plants will eventually outgrow their containers. While houseplants need to be "up-potted", that is, placed in larger and larger containers, we maintain the miniaturization of a bonsai tree by keeping the roots confined to the small container. On average, repotting will be necessary every 3-5 years, but the tree should be removed from its container and its root system inspected once a year. If the roots form a circular ball around the perimeter of the pot, it is time to trim the roots and repot. When repotting remember to (a) use only bonsai soil (b) remove air pockets by working the soil down through the roots (c) do not remove more than 20% of the root system (d) repot during the appropriate repotting season (e) water well and keep out of the sun for a week or two.