

BONSAI IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE CLASSICS

In this article, the second in the series on bonsai in South Africa, I look at some of the southern African trees that have proven to be excellent bonsai subjects, most of which should be readily available. In an article such as this, one tries to be objective but unfortunately some subjectivity is bound to creep into one's opinions. It is important to stress that bonsai is art and so it is critical to use material that allows one to achieve one's artistic aims. It would be useless to try to paint a delicate water-colour landscape on kitchen waxed paper because the paint would just bead on the surface and it would be impossible to achieve any success. The same goes with one's choice of bonsai stock; one will achieve much greater success if the correct species is chosen.

by **Carl Morrow**, University of Cape Town

The wild olive, *Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*

This is an excellent species that can hold its own amongst the best in the world. It is a little slow to develop but the quality of the material available and the design and refinement potential of this tree makes it worth the effort. Its powers of recovery after collection are wonderful and it vigorously shoots back on bare trunks. The leaves reduce dramatically and the tree develops beautiful, dense, evergreen foliage canopies. Larger trunked trees often feature spectacular areas of natural and created deadwood that significantly enhance the apparent age of the trees. The exposed wood is very durable and with a minimum of effort, the character of the tree can be maintained for many years. It is best to keep these trees outdoors in a sunny and warm position. They strike from cuttings and are quite easy to grow.

Two other species of olive can be used – the coast olive, *O. exasperata*, and ironwood, *O. capensis*. These trees do not respond as well as the wild olive but can still be developed into attractive bonsai.

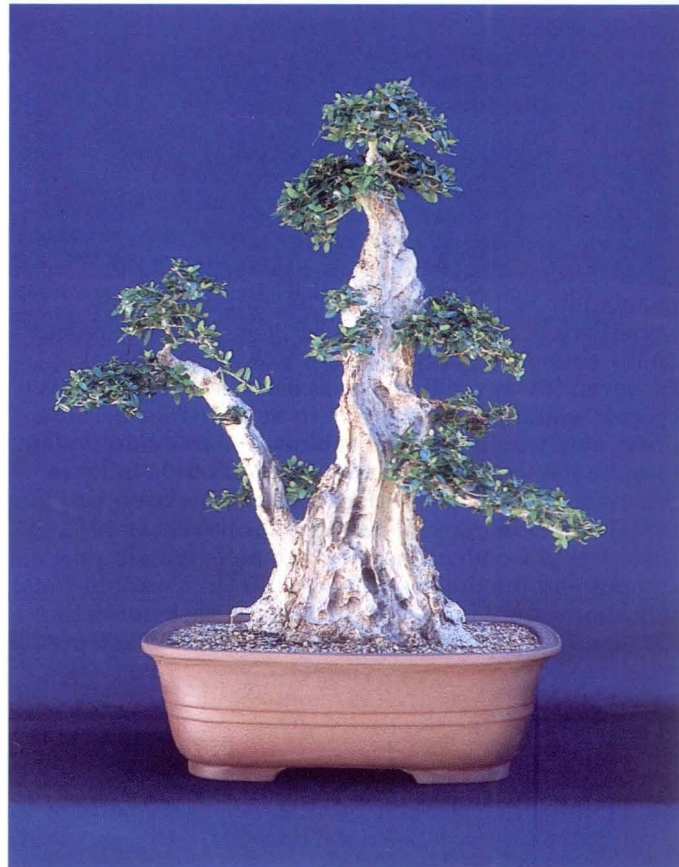
The wild figs

There are many indigenous fig trees that are used in bonsai. These include the veld fig, *Ficus burtt-davyi*, the common wild fig, *F. natalensis*, rare forest fig, *F. craterostoma*, red-leaved rock fig, *F. ingens* and sycamore fig, *F. sycomorus*. The trees develop strong trunks and powerful roots that can be trained over rocks to achieve the effect of a natural tree scrambling across a landscape. They are either evergreen or semi-deciduous and the leaves reduce well and form good canopies. Figs are generally tropical in nature and so they enjoy humid, warm conditions. They can grow in sun or semi-shade and are also hardy enough to be grown indoors near a bright window. They can tolerate heavy pruning and respond well to an annual winter refinement trimming that encourages budding on naked areas of the branches.

Be careful not to treat figs with a systemic insecticide because this causes them to defoliate which is usually not fatal but does set the tree back considerably.

Acacias

Acacias are a symbol of Africa and thus have been used as bonsai for many years. Species that are used include the sweet thorn, *Acacia karroo*, splendid acacia, *A. robusta*, monkey thorn, *A. galpinii*, camel thorn, *A. erioloba*, knob-thorn, *A. nigrescens*, black monkey-thorn, *A. burkei* and black thorn, *A. mellifera*. These trees tend to have a sparse branching pattern.



Above. Wild olive, *Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*, shaped by the author.

Below. A splendid acacia, *Acacia robusta*, shaped by Bernard Coetzee. This is one of the five acacias that were grown from seed in 1928. The trees grew in nursery cans for forty-one years when a bonsai artist discovered them and started training them as bonsai in 1969.



Good branching angles, and thus development is achieved if the new shoots are allowed to grow for a while before they are trimmed back. The compound leaves give the effect of fine ramification and minute leaves. Contrary to expectation these are thirsty trees that like a lot of water but are sensitive to waterlogged soil and so they need to be planted in freely drained potting medium.

Australian bonsai growers that I have spoken to were surprised to hear that South Africans use these trees for bonsai as their acacias are not very long lived. There are five *Acacia* bonsai in Cape Town that were grown from seed in 1928 and they are still strong and vigorous seventy-two years later! Wild and nursery grown acacias develop strong taproots that need to be reduced over time. Certain species such as *A. galpinii* have a tendency to shed branches which can be very frustrating when one has spent years nurturing a branch only to have it die as part of the tree's self thinning process.

Species such as *A. galpinii* can be grown indoors near a bright window but away from direct sun through the glass. Trees that are grown indoors will not grow as fast as their outdoor counterparts but they should survive and grow with proper care. One does need to be careful not to over-water indoor trees.

Witolienhout, *Buddleja saligna*

This tree is a fairly recent addition to the South African classic species chart. It is a widespread tree that develops spectacular, ridged trunks that impart a feeling of maturity and great age. The leaves are grey green and reduce tremendously. Very dense, finely divided foliage pads can be rapidly developed. The tree needs to be grown in sunny conditions and regularly fertilized. The bark and cambium are very thin and easily damaged while the twigs and roots can be very brittle so be careful when wiring and pruning. Cuttings strike easily but *Buddleja* is a bit temperamental and does not like too much root pruning once it is planted in a bonsai pot. One needs to remove all the thick roots on the tree when it is first planted into a container. Recent indications are that the wood of the tree is not as durable as originally thought and so particular care needs to be taken of exposed deadwood features. Because this tree is reasonably new to bonsai cultivation, about fifteen years or so, it is not surprising that we are still learning about its horticultural requirements.

White stinkwood, *Celtis africana*

The beauty of this tree lies in the very fine, twiggy branch ramification, which results in a superlative winter silhouette. It is a fast growing tree that is both drought and frost tolerant. (A recent issue of *South African Gardening*, page 23, August 2000, highlighted the problem of the foreign *Celtis sinensis* and its alleged threat to the indigenous species from hybridization.) In my experience, *C. africana* often grows in a strange, twisted and sparse way that can be very frustrating to develop as a bonsai. This may be as a result of the dry, coastal conditions experienced in Cape Town as they are reported to be wind sensitive. Bonsai artists from other areas claim that *C. africana* is a wonderful tree to use. Many nurseries mistakenly label *C. sinensis* as *C. africana* and this could be where a lot of the confusion is coming from as *C. sinensis* is better suited to a coastal climate.



Witolienhout, *Buddleja saligna*, shaped by Sally Visagie.

Dwarf hibiscus, *Anisodonteia scabrosa*

This, and the following two trees, are new introductions to bonsai cultivation. There are indications that they have the potential to be developed into good bonsai, but only time will tell. *Anisodonteia scabrosa* is a very pretty, widespread shrub in the hibiscus family that grows rapidly, develops the appearance of age quickly, has small leaves and has the added appeal of producing small pink flowers. It is readily propagated from cuttings. Be careful with bending the branches as they are brittle. This species is really a herbaceous shrub and so its longevity as a bonsai is still to be demonstrated but it is a good tree on which to learn bonsai techniques.

Commiphora harveyi

The bronze paper commiphora or rooistamkanniedood is a large, juicy trunked tree that strikes well from cuttings and, because of its semi-succulent nature, it has the ability to 'heal over' very large cuts. The leaf and foliage development is good. They grow in full sun and do not like to be watered too much. They prefer a very rich, but free draining growing medium. As far as I know this tree is not in very widespread cultivation as a bonsai yet.

Ouhout, *Leucosidea sericea*

This tree grows at higher altitudes, particularly in the foothills of the Drakensberg. It is characterized by gnarled trunks that develop striking white deadwood areas that are surrounded by dramatic smooth, red bark giving an effect reminiscent of the classic Chinese juniper bonsai (*Juniperus chinensis*) seen in China, Japan Korea and Taiwan. The soft, feathery, grey green foliage, however, is very different to that of the junipers. Again this tree is a new introduction to bonsai and so aspects, such as the durability of the dead wood, are still to be proven.

This is a start on what to look for when setting out in this marvellous art. These articles do not dwell on the aesthetic theory behind bonsai design and what makes a tree a good bonsai as these details can be found in most bonsai books. My next article will discuss trees that are regionally available and some that have shown themselves not to work as bonsai. ♻️