

BONSAI IN SOUTH AFRICA: UNUSUAL SPECIES

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Most of the many hundreds of tree species indigenous to southern Africa have not been investigated for their bonsai potential. The reason for this is that there are few bonsai growers in the country and these growers are concentrated in the urban areas and so their access to indigenous plants is limited. Most nurseries do not stock weird and wonderful species, and tend to supply a very limited range of indigenous material. Having said this,

I was amazed to see the length of the list that developed when I sat down to write this, the third article in the series, in which I look at southern African trees that have been used as bonsai.

It would be interesting for bonsai artists to investigate previously unused species. However, as I stated in the last article, it is important that the trees respond well to training so that an attractive result is achieved. If you are trying a new species and it is not working as a bonsai then I would suggest you attempt something else rather than wasting time and space on something that will always look odd! There are some criteria for testing to see if a new species is worth further investigation: small leaves or the possibility of leaf reduction, powers of healing and recovery, root regeneration, the ability to form new buds on mature trunks and branches, flexibility of branches and attractive features such as bark, surface roots, leaves, flowers or fruit. Clearly all don't have to be fulfilled but they do help to achieve success.

The following trees have been tried as bonsai but are less common and often more regionally available when compared to the examples that were discussed previously.

Baobab (*Adansonia digitata*)

This is a symbol of Africa and therefore many people want to grow this tree. I have seen some good results from the northern parts of the country where the climate is suited to their cultivation. In other areas, such as Cape Town, some growers have successfully maintained them but the winter rains and cool weather are really not suitable for baobabs. During winter, the trees need a very deep dormancy and so in Cape Town people often put the trees in a garage to prevent them from getting wet. Baobabs apparently grow easily from seed but it does take time for them to develop their distinctive bottle shaped trunk.

Bauhinia (*Bauhinia natalensis* and *B. tomentosa*)

These are pretty little trees that have attractive foliage, a small bi-lobed leaf and beautiful flowers, either white or yellow. I have not seen any large specimens and so feel that it is more suited to small elegant trees. Bauhinias are hardy and are suitable for beginners.

Num-num (*Carissa*)

These are enigmatic trees because I have seen very few bonsai *Carissa* in South Africa, while in the United States it is often mentioned in bonsai publications and occasionally seen in photographs. They produce stiff woody growth and they have vicious spines on their trunks and branches. An added appeal is their sweetly scented flowers followed by bright red fruit. *Carissa bispinosa* is usually mentioned as it is readily available in nurseries, but other smaller-leaved species may also work well as bonsai.

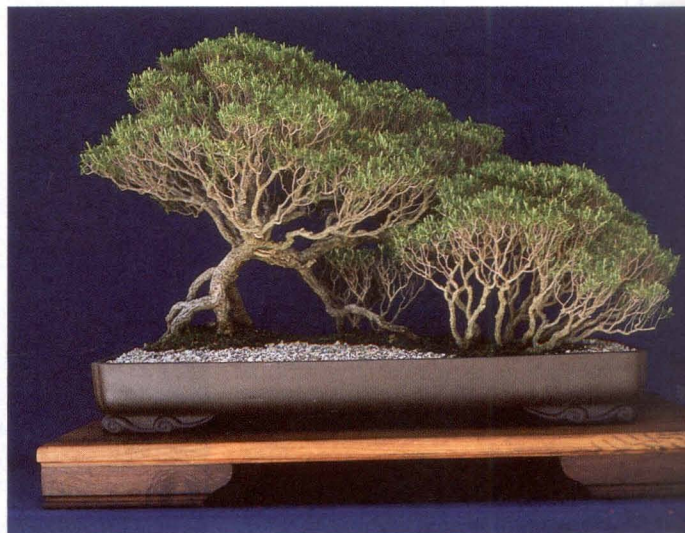
Cape may or confetti bush (*Coleonema album* and *C. pulchrum*)

This beautiful little bush develops into bonsai with rugged trunks tiny leaves and pretty white or pink flowers. The branches are brittle, so be careful when wiring or bending them. If a branch does snap, the tree helps by producing numerous buds from the mature wood. *Coleonema* trees flower well if they are kept slightly pot bound and they shouldn't be pruned after February because the flowers are setting at this time. After flowering is a good time to give an annual hard prune into shape to maintain the compact beauty of the tree. Re-potting should be done in spring. They produce masses of fine roots that fill the pot rapidly and it is best to remove only these roots rather than being too vigorous and bare rooting the tree as this will set it back considerably.



Above Cape may, *Coleonema album*. This is an unusual design, but the flowers make it most attractive. Artist: Mike Guile.

Below A good example of Cape may, *Coleonema album*. Artist: Isabel Hofmeyr. Photos: C. Morrow.



Thorny rope (*Dalbergia armata*)

This tree is often used by bonsai artists from KwaZulu-Natal. The trunks can get as large as 15 cm in diameter but this is rare in cultivation. The trunks and branches bear stout thorns and it is best to trim these off as this encourages development of side branches below the cuts. One disadvantage of *Dalbergia* is that scars and cuts do not heal very well. It strikes easily from cuttings and should be grown in full sun in a sandy soil.

Bladder nut and bluebush (*Diospyros whyteana* and *D. lycioides*)

This is another fine bonsai subject but as with *Coleonema*, it is more commonly seen in the Western Cape. *Diospyros whyteana* has beautiful, dark green, glossy foliage that looks very good on a bonsai. The leaves however, do not reduce very much making this tree more suitable for larger bonsai. It grows strongly but with a tendency to shoot upward which can weaken the lateral branches. This strong apical growth should be controlled with regular trimming. It grows in scrub and forest and so it should be cultivated in a protected, cool, shady spot. There are many species within this widespread genus, and some of the other species may also make good bonsai - I feel that *D. austro-africana* may have great potential.

Coral tree (*Erythrina caffra*, *E. humeana*, and *E. lysistemon*)

Coral trees develop into thick-stemmed, powerful bonsai. However, they do not develop fine branch ramification. It is best to grow them in full sun and dry conditions, as they are fleshy trees that can rot if kept too moist. *E. humeana* is a dwarf tree that can flower when grown as a bonsai. In Cape Town these trees are difficult to grow because they are prone to attack by stem borers. This can be treated with frequent applications of systemic insecticide. Elsewhere this is less of a problem.

Wild pride-of-India (*Galpinia transvaalica*)

Cultivated specimens of *Galpinia transvaalica* show wide variation in their leaves - from large to small - and it is the small-leaved varieties that should be chosen for bonsai. The trees form very beautiful bonsai, showing excellent branch ramification within the canopy. The leaves are a spectacular reddish colour in spring, followed by a deep green in summer that changes to yellow and very bright orange in autumn. Diligent nipping of new growth throughout the growing season stimulates strong growth and the development of a superior, compact, twiggy tree.

Cross berry (*Grewia occidentalis*)

This is another tree that is under-used in its local environment, yet is recommended overseas (I have just had to help a foreign author by sending her photographs of the tree!). It is an attractive tree that can develop a canopy of small, light green leaves and it has the advantage of producing its beautiful mauve flowers on the bonsai. I have seen a few small bonsai *Grewia* but having observed its development in gardens it should also make handsome larger bonsai. It strikes well from cuttings and the branches are very flexible allowing for easy training into bonsai forms.

White milkwood (*Sideroxylon inerme*)

This is a protected species but can often be found in nurseries. Milkwoods are slow to develop but they can be successfully grown as bonsai especially if you start with a tree with a large trunk. After heavy pruning, buds will emerge from the trunk and primary branches, and these can be used to develop finer branches and foliage masses. Over time, milkwood trees develop a canopy that looks a lot like a fig tree. Cut shoots should be left 4-5 mm longer than required to allow for the die-back that occurs in the species. This is an attractive bonsai that has the added character of being a rarity and a tree that is surrounded with history and folklore.

Succulent bonsai

South Africa is also famous for its wonderful succulent flora and some of these plants can be trained as bonsai, while some of them just have the instant bonsai look about them.

One author has even called them 'fun bonsai' as opposed to 'real bonsai'. Some are good trees to experiment with because their succulent nature allows them to withstand a tremendous amount of mistreatment while you are learning the techniques of bonsai. Unfortunately, some techniques such as wiring, are very difficult to do on these succulent plants and so it is better to use directional pruning techniques to achieve the desired shape.

The succulent plants that develop into natural bonsai shapes can be very striking and have the appearance of great age. This is also an interesting avenue for collecting if you are interested in succulent plants. One can collect the species along with trying to find dramatically shaped and often very beautiful specimens although I don't think that these would strictly be classed as bonsai.

Some plants, such as the round-leaved crassula (*Crassula arborescens*) and spekboom (*Portulacaria afra*), have a jointed growth form and the best way to trim them is to snap the twigs off at these joints. The tree will seal itself at this node and leaves will sprout out in the area. Care needs to be taken with their watering although many of the cultivated crassulas are tolerant of a wide range of growing conditions. ♡

We now get to the end of this narrative. In the next issue I will discuss some more species that have been attempted for bonsai along with giving some advice on how to go about establishing a collection of bonsai.



Above. **Bladder nut**, *Diospyros whyteana*. This tree was collected from the *Diospyros* hedge that was removed during the construction of the new conservatory at Kirstenbosch. This is a wonderful example of how botanical heritage can be preserved through the thoughtfulness of project managers on environmentally sensitive sites. Artist: Len Redfern.

Below **Wild pride-of-India**, *Galpinia transvaalica*. A good example of a bonsai. Artist: Rudi Adam. Photos: C. Morrow.

