

BONSAI IN SOUTH AFRICA: YOUR COLLECTION

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In this article, the fourth and last in the series, I present information on ten more species of indigenous trees for bonsai in the form of a table, and discuss how to set about establishing your personal bonsai collection.

What do you want from the art? One can be a serious grower with a large collection of a variety of trees, an enthusiast with a medium sized collection or just someone that enjoys the art and maintains a collection of a few trees. If you just want a small collection then you only need a small amount of space in a convenient area, such as a patio. At the other extreme, you could completely re-design your garden and install a watering system and shade houses for your more delicate trees.

To start, I would recommend joining a bonsai club* to make contact with like-minded people and you can learn more about the local conditions than reading a book on the subject. A good first step to establishing a bonsai collection is to buy a couple of reasonable quality but not too expensive trees. These will maintain your interest until the trees that you will start growing from other sources mature into bonsai. Be wary of spending too much money on your first attempts at bonsai as it is likely that they will be treated to a degree of mismanagement while you are learning. Become as informed as possible before buying a tree - good bonsai are costly but price and age do not necessarily make a good bonsai. Ask the trader lots of questions. If they have difficulty answering them, be careful of what you buy. Stock questions include, 'What type of tree is this?' and 'When was it planted into this pot?' A good test to make sure that it is firmly rooted is to **gently** move the trunk and it should be firm within the pot. Ask when it will need re-potting and you should expect the answer to be 'in about two years from now'. If the tree has training wires on it ask when they should be taken off. The best time is when the wire just starts pressing into

the swelling branch.

If you ever see very good bonsai being sold at a peculiar venue for surprisingly cheap prices it is likely that they have been stolen and you would be helping enormously by contacting your local club or society* as they often know when trees have been stolen from local collections.

Probably the most common source of material for bonsai growers would be trees from commercial nurseries. These trees have been matured for a number of years and so one can start the training process immediately after buying the tree. As I have said earlier, though, most nurseries stock a very limited range of indigenous tree material. Other sources of bonsai stock include seed and seedlings and cuttings. It is wonderfully satisfying to develop plants from seed. This is the slowest way of creating a bonsai but it does have the advantage of one having control over every development stage of the tree and so very fine results can be achieved. A reasonable, small bonsai of about 15 cm height can be developed within five to ten years. If you want a bigger tree some other development techniques beyond the scope of this article would need to be employed and the achievement of a bonsai would take a bit longer. Development of cuttings is another popular way of increasing the size of one's bonsai collection. Trees that have desirable characteristics can be selected and propagated and so you end up with many more of these good trees.

The reasonably uncommon practice of layering is frequently used by bonsai artists. The most common

variation of this being used is 'aerial layering' where an attractive branch of a large tree is selected and a ring of bark is stripped off the branch, treated with rooting hormone and then wrapped in sphagnum moss inside a plastic sleeve. After some time (usually months) the branch will produce new roots from the damaged section and the new tree can then be removed from the mother plant and developed as a bonsai.

As a bonsai artist, one is always on the look out for gardens that are being re-designed and hedges that are being removed as these are potential sources of wonderful, mature bonsai stock. When you see an area being developed speak to the site manager and find out whether there will be any trees available for you to collect.

All of these techniques used to add to your bonsai collection are discussed in books about bonsai and so refer to these for more information. Bonsai club members can also give you valuable advice on these different methods.

I have left the most controversial issue in bonsai until last in this series of articles. The reason for this was to try to show sceptics that this is a credible art that is practised by people that are passionate about horticulture and are genuinely interested in the well being of the plants that they grow as bonsai. The issue to which I am referring is whether or not trees should be collected from the wild. This is a difficult moral issue that would take up an entire article in itself to investigate. Natural trees provide the serious bonsai artist with a quality of material with age and

Far left A bad tree to buy. Not only is this an untrained cutting, but there is no design, no refinement and the tree is rather poorly matched with the pot. It should not be called a bonsai, but with training and time it may become one. Left A good sales tree. It shows a history of design, some refinement that will improve over time and it is matched well with its pot. This is the kind of tree that one should look for if one wants to buy a bonsai. Both these trees are *Ficus burtt-davyi*.

Photos: C. Morrow.



character that is impossible to acquire from any other source. Most of the classic bonsai specimens that are seen in the Far East were collected from the mountains and windswept islands. In any given landscape only a very small proportion of the trees (as few as one in 1000 in fruitful areas and lower in less interesting sites) are suitable as bonsai stock. In South Africa there are so few bonsai growers and such low commercial demand that I don't think that nature is under threat from this source. Agriculture, mining, and urbanization are considerably larger problems, but one would need to watch out for unscrupulous collectors or exporters. A key advantage of belonging to a bonsai club is that there is the expertise to help you collect trees and usually clubs arrange organized 'digs' that allow you to go out into the field and find bonsai stock. They may also organize collections of material in areas that are earmarked for development and therefore destruction.

As a bonsai artist one should collect trees in a very responsible manner. One must know the regulations surrounding collecting of trees as many are protected species in certain regions. It is critical to get permission from the landowner or relevant authority. You will have to explain what you want to do and experience shows that most friendly farmers will shake their heads in disbelief and allow you to collect one or two 'bossies'. Most importantly, only take those trees that you can properly care for. Don't be too ambitious and collect so many trees that most of them will be neglected and may even die through lack of care. When you collect the tree make sure you use the correct techniques at the correct time of year to ensure the best chance of survival and make very sure that you leave a minimum of evidence of your presence once the tree has been removed, by filling in the hole and returning rocks to their original positions.

Bonsai is a wonderful hobby that can be tremendously rewarding at whatever level you want to practice it at and it would be fantastic if people have been sufficiently inspired by this series of articles to try their hand at the art. ♀

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*A list of bonsai contacts in the different regions is available from the Botanical Society at tel (021) 797 2090 or e-mail info@botanicalsociety.org.za or from Heather Pfister at the African Bonsai Association, tel (043) 748 1317, e-mail tanuki@mweb.co.za. If there are any specific questions that you would like to ask, please contact me at e-mail morrow@botzoo.uct.ac.za.

MORE INDIGENOUS TREES SUITABLE FOR BONSAI

Common Name	Latin Name	Observations
Small bone-apple	<i>Coddia rudis</i> (<i>Xeromphis rudis</i>)	Supposed to be good for bonsai although temperamental when re-potted.
Kei apple	<i>Dovyalis caffra</i>	This tree is not suitable for the creation of traditional looking bonsai but it is frequently used. It can produce fruit that have the added charm of being edible. With adequate light, this tree can be grown indoors although it will probably not produce fruit.
Natal dombeya	<i>Dombeya cymosa</i>	Sweetly scented autumn flowers and colourful leaves are the attraction of this tree. The leaves are rather large but they can reduce to 20 mm in a bonsai.
Wild peach	<i>Kiggelaria africana</i>	Grows very easily and quickly but has a stiff, rather difficult growth habit.
Carnival bush	<i>Ochna serrulata</i>	Attractive yellow flowers and colourful fruits. It buds well on old wood.
Yellowwood	<i>Podocarpus</i> spp.	The Yew Podocarpus (<i>Podocarpus macrophylla</i>) is extensively used in China to create very beautiful, classic bonsai while here in South Africa we rarely see yellowwood bonsai. This is possibly due to the South African trees having a continuous growth form (as opposed to the whorled form seen in <i>P. macrophylla</i>) that makes refinement of the tree difficult. It has been claimed that the Breede River yellowwood (<i>P. elongatus</i>) makes excellent bonsai although I have not yet seen any good specimens.
Taaibos, karee, crowberry and kuni-bush	<i>Rhus</i> spp.	Many <i>Rhus</i> species are used, some are better than others although most seem to have very stiff branches. In my experience, they can bud well on old branches if they are pruned hard as they seem to exhibit strong terminal dominance.
Karoo and weeping boerbean	<i>Schotia afra</i> and <i>S. brachypetala</i>	<i>S. afra</i> is the more desirable plant as it has much smaller leaves than <i>S. brachypetala</i> . The main feature of this tree as a bonsai is its beautiful, delicate orange-red leaves that emerge in the spring. It develops a gnarled trunk while the branches have a rather stiff growth habit.
Cape honeysuckle	<i>Tecoma capensis</i> (formerly <i>Tecomaria capensis</i>)	There are many cultivated forms of this plant and it is generally used as a colourful hedging plant. In old moribund hedges one can often find reasonable trunks that can be used as bonsai. As with most plants reviewed here it does not develop a compact refined image associated with classical bonsai but it is a pretty plant than can be developed into an attractive shape with the added feature of producing flowers than can range from deep orange-red through salmon to yellow.
Clanwilliam and mountain cedar	<i>Widdringtonia cedarbergensis</i> and <i>W. nodiflora</i>	These two trees are particularly bad as bonsai because they have very strong terminal dominance on the branches which results in a tree with lanky branches with only a tuft of foliage at the end and no twig development near the trunk of the tree.

Although I have not grown all of the trees in this table, I have briefly commented on remarks and observations made by other artists. There are likely to be many other local species that have been used by bonsai artists all over the country, and it would be interesting to hear your personal experiences – perhaps by a letter to the editor.