

BONSAI IN SOUTH AFRICA

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There has been a tremendous interest in matters oriental lately, from Feng Shui gardens to Zen crockery, and along with this, a renewal of interest in bonsai. Most people have an idea of what bonsai is but their knowledge of the art is often filled with mysticism and bad information. A good definition of bonsai is an artistically trained tree grown in a pot or some other (usually portable) container. In other words, they are just normal trees and shrubs that have been grown using common horticultural practices such as pruning, trimming to desired buds and undercutting to control their growth and to achieve an aesthetically pleasing result.

Many people believe that bonsai are starved of nutrients and tortured horribly to get them into a bonsai shapes. This is not true: many bonsai growers feed their trees heavily (sometimes once a week with full strength liquid fertilizers) during the growing season in order to achieve maximum growth and development that can be used in the bonsai design. (One word of warning, this treatment results in very fast growth and so diligence is necessary to ensure that the trees develop correctly. Furthermore, when the bonsai is nearing its final design by being refined, feeding needs to be more carefully controlled in order to prevent excess development.)

Caring for bonsai is not technically difficult; it just takes some initial thought on their positioning and then a regular commitment to remember to water them adequately. Generally, bonsai must be grown outdoors. Some species, such as the figs, can be grown indoors but these are the exception rather than the rule. It is unfortunate that many public exhibitions of bonsai occur in halls as this perpetuates the belief that the trees should be grown inside. It is difficult to make general recommendations about the best position for the trees but a good, standard formula would be in a site that gets a few hours of, ideally, morning sun a day. The position should be light and airy at other times and it also should be in a place that you visit at least once a day so that you remember to water the tree regularly. A semi-shaded

patio is a good place to start.

Watering is one aspect of care that many people are very afraid of. A good rule of thumb is that the trees should always be moist but not saturated. When a tree is watered, it is best to thoroughly wet the soil and then give it a chance to dry back to a moist level rather than giving it small doses of water as this leads to the development of dry areas within the soil. For a small collection, carefully dunking the trees in a basin of water for a few minutes works very well. Fertilizer can also be applied in this way. With my trees, I water once a day in warm summer weather and as required during colder periods. Please remember that eaves of roofs can prevent rain from getting to the trees so even if your garden is well saturated it pays to frequently check your bonsai to ensure that they too are getting enough moisture.

Trimming the tree is relatively easy. You should just keep the tree in the shape you desire. Good development results if the shoots are allowed to extend to 6 to 8 leaves and then trimmed back to the first two leaves which will then produce two shoots that will grow out and can then be trimmed again. Repeating this results in the development of branch ramification. If you want a certain area in the tree to develop more, you should leave this region to grow until it is as big as you want and then you can start trimming the shoots back.

Re-potting the tree is somewhat more technical and it is best to get information about local conditions from growers in your region. During re-potting, old roots are removed and some of the old soil is replaced with fresh growing medium that is full of nutrients and has a revitalised water holding structure. This gives the tree new space into which it can grow as well as providing the new, healthy roots with

plenty of nutrients and water. The growing medium should hold water well but it must be sufficiently friable and free draining to prevent waterlogging. A mixture of half compost and half sifted river sand (that is retained by a 1 mm sieve) serves me well here in Cape Town but it is best to find out about your local conditions from local bonsai growers*.

Many 'How to' books have been published on bonsai. Southern African readers need to be aware that most of these books are written from a European, American or Japanese perspective, and are limited in information about local climatic conditions and there is no information on local species that can be used for bonsai. This is why it is important to get in touch with nearby clubs and growers so that you can draw on their personal experiences. Indigenous species recommended for beginners to the art are the wild figs (*Ficus natalensis*, *Ficus burtt-davyi* and others), wild olive (*Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*), witolienhout (*Buddleja saligna*), *Acacia* species and white stinkwood (*Celtis africana*). In a future issue of *Veld & Flora*, I will look at these in more detail. ♡

*A list of local growers is available from the Botanical Society at 021 797 2090, or e-mail <botsocsa@gem.co.za>.

This tree, a wild fig (*Ficus natalensis*) has been in training for about 15 years and shows the ramification and refinement that can be achieved with this species. You can also see the way in which the apex has become too thick in relation to the rest of the tree and this area will need to be re-trained. Bonsai are never really finished: they need to be slightly changed and adapted over time.

