



A bonsai is a mature tree in miniature, growing in a small, shallow pot. In essence, the ideal is to reproduce the beauty and strength of an ancient tree, with a surrounding "landscape" of rock and moss.

The elegant glazed pot, the "landscape", and the tree itself, should all form an aesthetically pleasing whole. This art form was first produced by the Chinese, over 2000 years ago, and was introduced to the West in the 20th century. The training and nurturing of such trees is a fascinating hobby, and with care a specimen can live for many years. (The oldest known bonsai are about 800 years old!) These trees are not naturally small, but are made dwarf by the treatment they receive.

Two types of tree are used for bonsai - INDOOR and OUTDOOR. If you are not sure which sort you are buying, please ask!

Indoor Bonsai are tender species often grown as houseplants (for example - weeping fig, Ficus benjamina), and need normal houseplant treatment in terms of light and temperature, but more careful watering due to the small pot size.

Outdoor Bonsai are hardy conifers (eg pine, Pinus spp.) or broadleaf trees (eg maple, Acer spp.) which will grow happily in a sunny spot outside. Do not treat them as houseplants - they will survive only a few days indoors. They need a cold spell in winter but don't let the compost freeze solid in the pot.

In very cold conditions protect them in a cold frame or unheated greenhouse, or wrap them in fleece. Make sure they don't bake dry in the summer.

CARING FOR YOUR BONSAI

WATERING

Keep your tree moist but not wet. Watering by plunging the pot into a container of rainwater (not too cold!) is the most effective method, and keeping the atmosphere moist by surrounding the pot with moist pebbles will also help for indoor bonsai. Daily watering may be necessary, particularly for outside bonsai in summer. Don't let the pot dry out completely.

FEEDING

Feed little and often, preferably with specialist bonsai plant food, throughout the growing season.

WIRING

You can encourage your bonsai to grow into a pleasing shape by wrapping the trunk and branches with soft copper or aluminium wire, carefully bending the young, pliable growth. After a growing season it will usually have hardened into the desired shape.

PRUNING

Pinch out the growing tips at regular intervals to maintain the shape you want. Some species respond better to pruning than to wiring.

REPOTTING

This should be done every 2 to 4 years to keep the bonsai growing well. Prune off up to a third of its roots, especially any thick tap root, but retain most of the fine feeding roots. Repot using free-draining compost (preferably specialist bonsai compost) in the same pot, unless a larger container is needed for visual balance.