

1. THE HISTORY, ORIGINS AND PHILOSOPHY OF BONSAI.

A. History.

Contrary to popular belief, the art of bonsai started in China, not Japan.

Initially bonsai wasn't started as an art form but rather came from the need or necessity of horticulture, for these three reasons;

i. The Chinese farmer found it far easier to transport a fruit tree or any other food producing plant in some form of container. This gave him the ability to move his prize crop, or to transport it to another area for propagation or sale.

ii. The other reason that this method was used was to give the owner greater control over the tree for its fruit and flowering qualities. It allowed him greater command over the growth and health of the tree.

iii. Thirdly trees and plants play an important part in the cultural significance of the Chinese. At various times of the year, ceremonies were hallmarked with the use of different types of trees. Having them in containers enabled them to make them transportable, thus allowing them to bring them into their homes for these ceremonies. Having a tree that was flowering at the same time as the corresponding festival was highly prized!

The art of shaping trees commenced probably as early as 2205 BC. This was inspired by the manicured gardens of the Chinese royalty, where many trees were shaped to conform to the design of the garden. This type of garden is still seen today and is perhaps one of the key note features of both the Japanese and Chinese garden landscapes.

Bonsai became a part of the focal point of both poetry and art, much of which is still seen today. Much of the styling reflected the philosophical understanding of the east, that which was based in Taoism. Taoism is where the idea of yin and yang developed, and is seen in art where a thin line is complimented with a thick line, a straight line is complimented with a curved line and so on. Also part of the belief was that even though something in nature was very small, because of its great age it contained the power and strength of the larger specimen, and even more so because it was contained in a much smaller space.

B. Bonsai or potted tree?

The word 'Bonsai' comes from the Japanese, and means literally plant (sai) in a small pot (bon). Yet the concept of bonsai is far more defined. To just put a small tree in a pot does not make a bonsai. Many trees seen for sale at markets, or even some nurseries are merely young saplings placed in a bonsai container and sold as such. It is the art form of bonsai that will eventually create what is pleasing to the eye. It will immediately take you into a small world where you feel that you could climb the tree, or walk amongst the forest.

We discuss various styles in the section 2. "Styles", but you must remember that they are guidelines only! As you use these guidelines, you will bring your own personal touch to the tree, this is where the artistry comes in. Yes this does take time, but there is something very special working with a living piece of art!!

E. Keeping them small.

Many people think a bonsai is made small by starving it for food and water keeping it in a small container. The exact opposite is true!

A healthy bonsai receives the optimum amount of water, fertilizer, and light possible. Although some specimens are found in rock clefts, or tree hollows etc, these rarely capture the essence of what we know as bonsai. For a tree to be kept healthy the root system must be allowed to continually grow and spread to collect the nutrients needed to feed the foliage. If a tree is left in a pot and not rootpruned, eventually the rootball will fill the pot not allowing for room for new fibrous roots to grow and feed the tree.

By the constant trimming of the roots, the tree will produce new top growth, which in turn are trimmed, allowing for more branch ramification, giving the tree the appearance of a greater age than it actually is. Over the years of the constant root and tip pruning, the wood of the trunk and branches ages and the size of the leaves begin to grow smaller giving the tree, the trunk and leaves a proportion that suggests great age.

One way of explaining the growth is to imagine the tree out of the ground, the leaves and the roots are fairly similar in size and proportion, they balance each other. They basically do the same job, only one above the ground, the other below. Therefore we understand that a balance is needed to be kept between them if we are to expect healthy growth.