

Bonsai Beginnings

A guide for beginners to get you started



A bonsai is a stylised representation of a fully grown tree cultivated in a complimentary pot, the whole exhibiting character, grace and beauty.

Developing a bonsai is not something you can do overnight unless of course you buy one that has already been styled or is at least part way there. It can and will take years to reach a point where your tree is good enough to be called a bonsai. But don't let this put you off, it is, after all, the learning and applying of the various techniques that is the real fun. I am sure that anyone who paints a picture, carves a sculpture or builds a model steam engine gets much more pleasure from the process than they do from gazing at the finished work, and it's the same with bonsai. Having said that it can be very disheartening if you are making little progress, so I want to give you some hints and tips that will help you on your way.

The first thing you need to do is join a local bonsai club or society. I know that not everyone likes the idea of being in a club but trust me you will save yourself a lot of mistakes and frustration. You can learn from books up to a point but there is nothing like asking more experienced enthusiasts for advice, they will be only too happy to help you, and there are a great many books out there that are not as useful as they should be, especially for the raw beginner.

You may think that the most obvious thing you need is a tree. Wrong! You need lots of trees. Progress is made season by season not day by day so if you have only one or two trees you will do a lot of thumb twiddling. I have listed below some species of tree that lend themselves more readily to being styled as bonsai. (Remember, bonsai are not a special type of tree, they are everyday trees that are kept small by regular pruning.) You should try to include at least some of these in your collection because they are easy to cultivate and will give you quicker results.

Mountain maple - *Acer palmatum*

English elm - *Ulmus procera*

Chinese elm - *Ulmus parvifolia*

Hawthorn - *Crataegus monogyna*

Cotoneaster (small leaved) - *C. horizontalis*

Blackthorn - *Prunus spinosa*

Scots pine - *Pinus sylvestris*

Chinese juniper - *Juniperus chinensis*

Sabina juniper - *Juniperus sabina*

Lebanon cedar - *Cedrus libanii*

Larch - *Larix decidua*

This would be my list but ask club members for advice.

WHERE DO I GET TREES FROM?

I would suggest you build up a collection of 10 - 20 trees as soon as you can, certainly within the first year, because this will encourage you to engage with them more, ask more questions and so become more experienced.

So where do you get trees from? Probably the best place is at a bonsai exhibition where there will be traders who will have trees from £10 starters to £1,000 droolers, also tools, pots, wire and a whole lot else for sale. Your club will keep you informed of these events and there will possibly be an opportunity to car-share. Do try to go along to these exhibitions, you will get so much inspiration!

It may be that you have a trader in your area who would be a good source of trees, soil, equipment and advice, they may even run courses which you might consider.

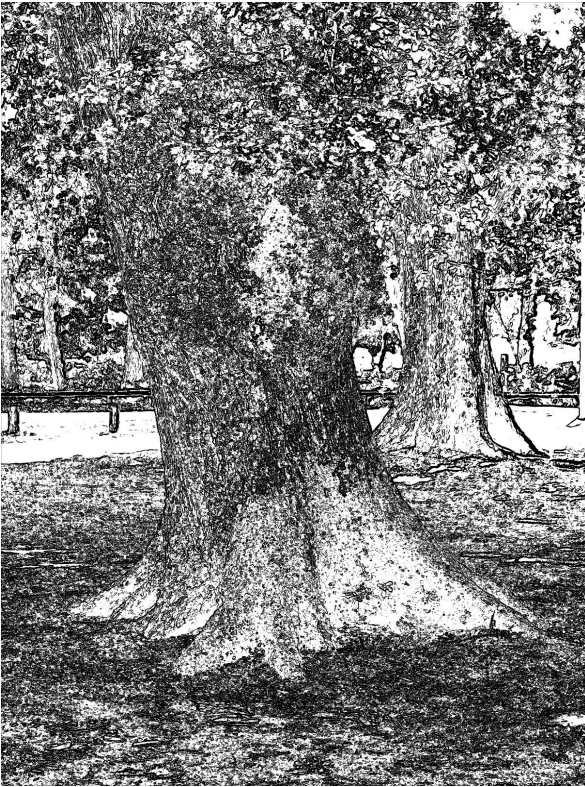
Sometimes other club members will sell trees on to make space for new ones. These will usually be a bargain and often a good opportunity but it's always worth asking why they are for sale.

Garden centres are another possibility, it is sometimes possible to find promising material in the tree sales section. They may also have 'bonsai' trees, soil, fertilizer, pots etc. for sale but these will probably be of a poor quality so proceed with caution, this also applies to any offerings at a general retail outlet. Occasionally though you can pick up something good so it's always worth a look.

Finally the most obvious place to get a tree is to dig one up! These are what are called 'raw material', trees that have characteristics that show the basics of a good bonsai but will need a deal of refinement. You may find something in your garden, your neighbours garden or in the wild, which you should dig out in the dormant season, usually December to February.

N.B. Digging from the wild should be done with the land-owner's permission.

WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR?



The most important thing to look for is a dynamic trunk. Remember, you are trying to emulate a fully grown tree. When working on branches you can bend and shape them, cut them off, grow new ones and refine their twigs and leaves but it is much more difficult to alter the character of the trunk so choose wisely from the start. It needs to be thick in relation to the height of the tree and to taper up from the base, never inversely tapered. It is often the case that the proportions of a “starter” tree can be dramatically improved by cutting off the top third or more, making the trunk look relatively thicker and more mature, but make sure you leave yourself some branches to work on. Choose a branch that can easily be wired upwards to form the new apex, thus creating taper, and cut the trunk off just above this point.

The image shows the trunk of an oak flaring out at ground level to become the roots. This is a desirable feature in a bonsai, it looks natural and gives a sense of stability. A few bends and kinks in the trunk (known as movement) are also a good thing so long as they look natural (see the front page), but try to avoid the bizarre.

With regard to the branches the more the merrier, you get to choose the best and you can cut off the rest. they tend to look more natural if they come off the trunk on the outside of a bend, get thinner as you go up the tree and spread out from all around the trunk creating visual depth. Think of the classic image of an old oak in the middle of a field. If they are approximately horizontal or downswept that’s great but if not they can be repositioned with wire. Normally in bonsai you are trying to give the impression of age and upswept branches make the tree look young.

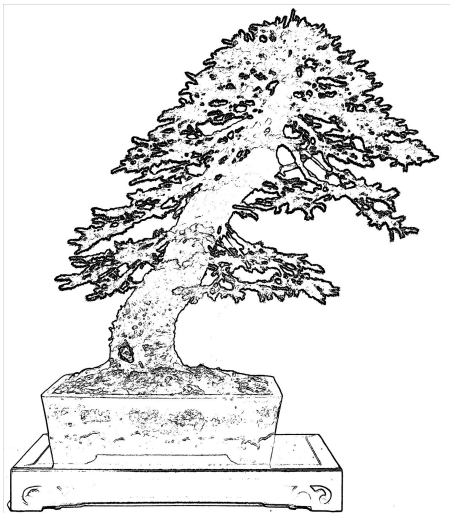
STYLES

It will help you to choose a tree if you can imagine the shape it could suitably be styled into. The ones I list below are there to give you some ideas.



Informal Upright.

The default bonsai style. A thick, tapering trunk with plenty of movement and the foliage arranged in an approximate triangle but not obscuring the character of the trunk. This tree is very natural looking - another example might have more clearly defined branches and tidier foliage pads. You might expect to see a tree like this in open ground, unshaded by other trees.



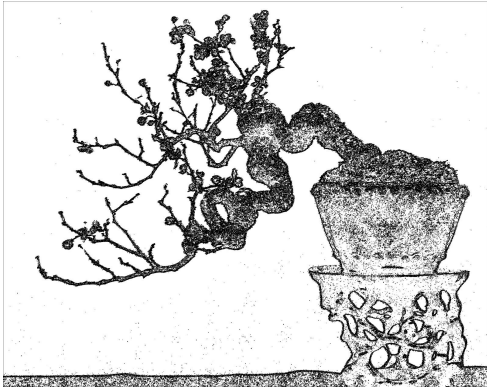
Slanting.

In this style the trunk is inclined but the branches are all at the same angle to the horizontal, in this case downswept, suggesting perhaps a tree on a hillside.



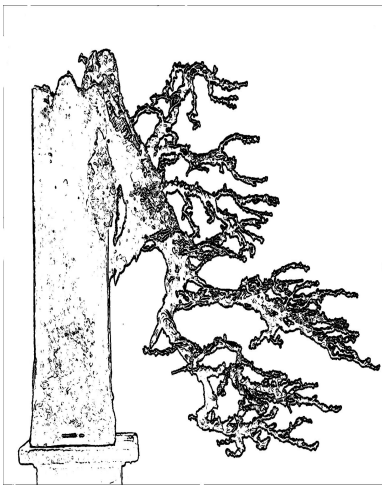
Windswept.

Particularly familiar to those living near the coast these trees are sculpted by the prevailing winds on exposed clifftops or open moorland. Hawthorn or blackthorn make especially good windswept bonsai.



Semi cascade.

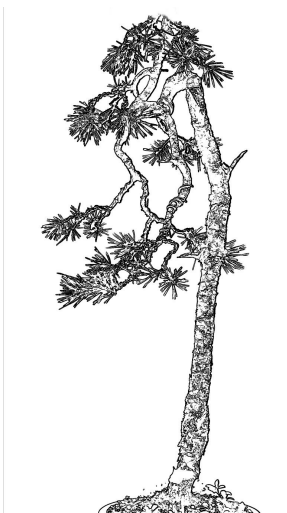
Often a tree growing from a steep mountainside or cliff will have to reach outward and down beyond the trees above it to get enough light to sustain it. Erosion around it's roots also contributes to this growing angle.



Cascade.

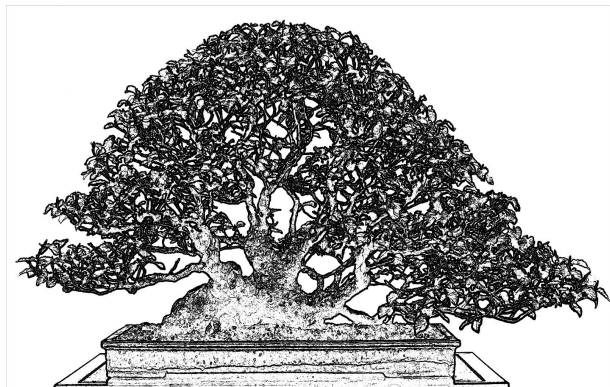
An exaggerated version of the semi cascade, this example is very rugged looking but they can also be styled as a long graceful bonsai winding down from a tall pot displayed on a tall stand.

*You may have noticed that as the trees become more precariously angled the pots become correspondingly deeper. This has the effect of bringing stability to the overall image and should be considered when you are choosing pots for your trees.



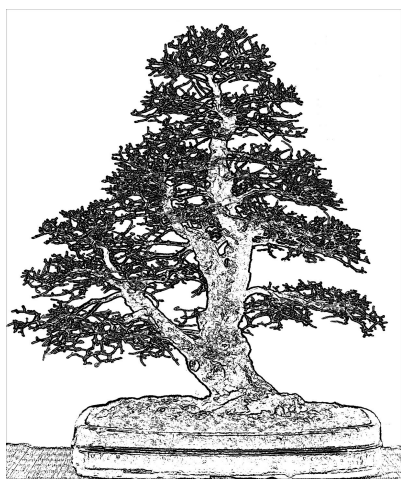
Literati.

This style is very much inspired by far eastern paintings which often depict tall slim pines with minimal branches growing from near the top of the trunk, held out elegantly like a posed dancer. In this example the branches cascade down but they could also be held out at an angle or even shortened so as to use just the foliage at the top of the tree.



Raft.

When a tree is blown over in a storm or falls due to erosion it can continue to grow if it still has functioning roots. Branches on the upward side of the trunk can develop into individual trunks and where the tree is in contact with the soil new roots can grow. This is the story the bonsai artist is trying to tell when developing a raft.



Multi trunk.

When two or more trunks grow from a single root base a tree in the wild will normally have the overall outline of a single tree. When styling a bonsai we try to achieve the same outcome with trunks of differing height and thickness to avoid symmetry.

It is frequently the case that the style you decide to adopt for your tree is dictated by the appearance of the visible roots or root-base. Before you make any irreversible changes to your tree dig around in the soil or if it's early spring re-pot it so that you can get a good look at them. If they are at awkward angles their appearance may be improved by planting the tree as a slanting style or if they are all on one side of the trunk maybe making a windswept or even cascade tree would be a good option. It is important at this stage to have an open mind about your tree, allowing it to lead you by turning its apparent shortcomings into features of its design.

FIND THE FRONT

Choosing the front is another aspect of bonsai that can be puzzling for the beginner.

When the tree is displayed it will broadly speaking be seen from only one angle which we call the front. This may sound obvious but it means that from the very beginning you need to decide where the front will be because all of the styling decisions you make and all of the techniques you apply to your tree will be carried out so that it shows its best features from the front and gives its most convincing performance as a full grown, characterful tree. The following are some tips to try to achieve this but you will no doubt have to find compromises.

Have the visible roots spreading out all around the base but make them less eye-catching at the front.

If the roots taper smoothly into the trunk and the trunk tapers as you go up the tree it will help to integrate the different elements into a unified whole.

If the trunk has front to back curves it will look better if it goes away from the viewer in the lower part of the tree and comes back higher up.

Try to show the most interesting curves in the trunk and any character features to their best advantage.

It is very distracting to have branches growing out towards the viewer, particularly in the first two thirds of the height, after all you want everyone to be able to see the trunk.

A great deal of the uniqueness of your tree comes from the branch placement and you will hear strongly voiced opinions and many “rules” on the subject. I only offer two tips.

- Branches growing at the same level on opposite sides of the trunk rarely look good.
- + Having most or all of the branches at a similar angle will give a harmonious feel if that is what you are after.

With ‘one sided’ trees such as cascade or windswept their beauty is in their profile and so they should be potted and displayed ‘side on’ to the viewer.

Finally, if you are still in doubt about the front it can sometimes help if you look for the back! Which features are ugly and best not seen? By a process of elimination you may well arrive at the only available front.

THAT'S ALMOST IT!

Just a couple more bits of advice.

Photograph your trees at least once a year, you will be amazed at how much progress you have made when you look back on your earliest efforts.

Buy your bonsai supplies from a specialist bonsai nursery where they know what they are talking about.

I mentioned earlier the option of shortcutting the process, ie. spending proper money! Well if you can afford it, go for it! Be sure to get help from someone knowledgeable but don't be afraid to buy expensive trees if you are really bitten by the bonsai bug (see previous paragraph). Personally I would buy really good quality raw material but if you want something you could put in the club show straight away that's fine. Remember, many of the excellent bonsai you see in exhibitions were originally bought for large sums of money and even the very best artists need high quality trees to work on.

There is still much more to learn, wiring, pruning, horticulture, pot selection etc. but I hope the above will help you to get started and that you will get as much pleasure from bonsai as I have.

Alan C.

