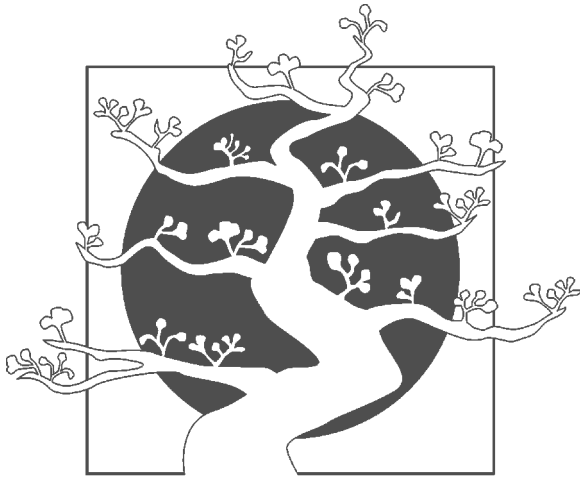




CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN



BONSAI COLLECTION

A remarkable collection
of majestic trees
in miniature

THE BONSAI COLLECTION

The Chicago Botanic Garden's bonsai collection is regarded by bonsai experts as one of the best public collections in the world. It includes 185 bonsai in twenty styles and more than 40 kinds of plants, including evergreen, deciduous, tropical, flowering and fruiting trees.

Since the entire collection cannot be displayed at once, select species are rotated through a display area in the Education Center's East Courtyard from May through October. Each one takes the stage when it is most beautiful.

To see photographs of bonsai from the collection, visit www.chicagobotanic.org/bonsai.

Assembling the Collection

Predominantly composed of donated specimens, the collection includes gifts from local enthusiasts and Midwest Bonsai Society members. In 2000, Susumu Nakamura, a Japanese bonsai master and longstanding friend of the Chicago Botanic Garden, donated 19 of his finest bonsai to the collection. This gift enabled the collection to advance to world-class status.

Caring for the Collection

When not on display, the bonsai in the Chicago Botanic Garden's collection are housed in a secured greenhouse that has both outdoor and indoor facilities. There the bonsai are watered, fertilized, wired, trimmed and repotted by staff and volunteers. Several times a year, bonsai master Susumu Nakamura travels from his home in Japan to provide guidance for the care and training of this important collection.

What Is a Bonsai?

Japanese and Chinese languages use the same characters to represent bonsai (pronounced "bone-sigh"). One character means "pot" or "tray," and the other means "to plant." Bonsai are ordinary trees and shrubs that have been trained in pots to grow into naturally beautiful shapes.

Most bonsai are small enough to sit on a table, and yet they are designed to look like full-sized trees, or groups of trees. To achieve this illusion, a bonsai artist must understand how a tree grows in nature and then use his or her skills to encourage the tree to develop the characteristics of old age even though the tree isn't necessarily old.

Bonsai artists train and dwarf trees through pruning, trimming and wiring plants with a clear sense of the final design of the tree. Each tree is designed to have a front (intended for viewing) and a back.

A Brief History of Bonsai

The first form of bonsai appeared in China over a thousand years ago, where it began as the practice of growing single specimen trees in pots. These earliest bonsai were naturally dwarfed trees that were collected from nature, potted and trained as bonsai.

The Japanese began practicing bonsai sometime during the historical Heian period (794-1185), adopting the art from Chinese culture and refining it to a level of sophistication that had not yet been seen. For the Japanese, bonsai came to represent a philosophy of harmony between humans, the soul and nature.

By the late 1800s, Japan had opened its boundaries to the rest of the world, and the miniature trees in containers were highly sought after by enthusiastic collectors outside of Japan. Bonsai exhibits at late 19th- and early 20th-century world's fairs in Europe and the United States also contributed to creating interest in the West.

Today the art of bonsai is a well-known and respected horticultural art form that is practiced worldwide.

BONSAI STYLES

In the Japanese bonsai tradition, each bonsai must conform to a clearly defined style. There are more than 100 recognized styles in bonsai, but most experts consider five basic styles to be essential—formal upright, informal upright, slanting, cascade and semi-cascade. The Chicago Botanic Garden's bonsai collection includes specimens in a range of 20 different styles.

This guide will help you become familiar with the essential bonsai styles and their Japanese names.

Formal Upright

(*Chokkan*)



A bonsai tree trained in the formal upright style mimics the growth of a tree under perfect natural conditions. The most important requirement for this style is that the trunk must be perfectly straight, tapering naturally and evenly from bottom to top.

The best species for training in the formal upright style are larches, junipers, pines and spruces because of their naturally tapered shape.

Informal Upright

(*Moyogi*)



In nature, trees bend or change their growth direction in response to their environment. They might grow away from the wind or other trees, or grow toward sunlight. The informal upright bonsai style represents this natural curve of a tree trunk in an imperfect environment.

In the informal upright style, the top of the tree, its apex, is usually positioned directly over its base, so the overall effect is that of an upright tree. Most species of sturdy plants are suitable for training in this style, but the most popular are maples.

Slanting

(*Shakkan*)



Trees slant naturally as a result of exposure to buffeting winds or deep shade when they are young. A bonsai tree trained in this style displays a trunk that leans to the left or right to imply a difficult childhood.

Some bonsai trees that have been trained to slant look as if they will fall over because of the angle at which they lean. No need to worry, though – these trees have strong roots growing under the soil that support the tree's weight.

The slanting bonsai style is similar to the informal upright, but in this style the tree's apex is not directly over its base.

Cascade

(*Kengai*)



The cascade style of bonsai calls to mind a weather-beaten old tree clinging to a cliff face. In this style, the tree's growing tip extends below the base of its container. A cascade bonsai appears to be struggling against gravity or seeking out scant sunlight.

The semi-cascade (*han-kengai*) bonsai style is similar to the cascade style. In this form, the tree grows over the rim of the container but does not drop below the container's base.

Many species of plants will adapt to cascade training, as long as they are not strongly upright naturally. Juniper is a favorite for training in the cascade and semi-cascade styles.

Broom

(*Hokidachi*)



A broom-style bonsai looks like a conventional handmade broom, turned upside down. Branches fan out from the top of a single straight trunk. This style imitates one of the common natural shapes of trees.

Because the broom shape is so common in nature, broom-style bonsai trees are often considered to be the most realistic-looking. The broom style, though, is considered an advanced technique and is difficult to achieve.

Deciduous trees are the best candidates for training in this style, especially those with fine branches and leaves. The elm is the most popular species of tree used for growing and training in the broom style.

Windswept

(*Fukinagashi*)



The windswept bonsai has all of its living branches facing the same direction, a training method creating the illusion of a tree that grew up in a very windy place.

When done well, windswept bonsai trees can look as if they are still being lashed by the wind.

The windswept effect can be applied to basic bonsai styles of trees, including formal or informal upright, slanting or semi-cascade trees. You may see a bonsai that fits into more than one styling category because of a combination of techniques.

The windswept style is most effectively applied to conifer species of trees. The effect is more difficult to achieve convincingly with deciduous trees because their leaves face in all directions.

Forest

(*Yose-ue*)



Forest-style bonsai plantings consist of several trees of the same species growing in a single pot.

In the Japanese tradition, trees are always planted in odd-numbered groups that are said to echo the randomness of nature.

Although a bonsai forest is viewed from outside, the style is meant to give the viewer the sensation of actually being within a forest.

PLANTS FOR BONSAI

Any substantial plant can be trained into a bonsai if it can adapt to the shallow pots and restricted growth that bonsai require. Most bonsai are hardy outdoor plants that need a period of cold dormancy in the winter to thrive, but they should be protected from the harshest winter conditions.

Some of the most popular species have remained so for centuries among bonsai enthusiasts. They offer special features such as flowers, attractive bark, small foliage or seasonal fruits and cones. They include the following plants:

Azalea (*Rhododendron*) - These are easily trained into tree form and can be used for most styles. In late spring, they produce spectacular flowers. Several flower colors are available.

Beech (*Fagus*) - Deciduous beeches tend to be grown in informal bonsai styles. They require very special and delicate technique in styling.

Fig (*Ficus*) - This tropical family includes some species that have been trained to grow as indoor bonsai. Still, these plants should be placed outside when the weather allows.

Juniper (*Juniperus*) - Probably the easiest genus for a beginner, evergreen juniper is readily available and can be trained in most styles.

Maple (*Acer*) - Two main species of maple are used in bonsai: Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*) and trident maple (*Acer buergerianum*). These deciduous plants are easy to care for, and many display stunning fall colors.

Pine (*Pinus*) - Pines make beautiful bonsai, but are not ideal for a first tree because they are difficult to train. The best pines are varieties with short needles because they support the illusion of a full-sized tree.

TO LEARN MORE

- Lewis, Colin. *Bonsai Survival Manual*.
Pownal, Vt.: Storey Communications, Inc., 1996.
- Naka, John Yoshio. *Bonsai Techniques, Vols. I and II*.
Whittier, Calif.: Bonsai Institute of California, 1973 & 1982.
- Yoshimura, Yuji and Giovanna M. Halford.
*The Japanese Art of Miniature Trees and Landscapes;
Their Creation, Care and Enjoyment*. Rutland, Vt.:
Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1971.



CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN

1000 lake cook road glencoe, illinois 60022

www.chicagobotanic.org (847) 835-5440

The Chicago Botanic Garden is owned by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.