

History of Bonsai

While the art of bonsai has long been associated with Japan, it actually originated first in China, and then spread eastward to Korea and then Japan. The art of bonsai was spread by Buddhist monks who wished to bring the “outdoors” inside their temples. From ancient paintings and manuscripts, we know that “artistic” container trees were being cultivated by the Chinese around 600 AD, but many scholars feel that bonsai, or at least potted trees, were being grown in China as far back as 500 or 1,000 BC. Bonsai first appeared in Japan during the 12th century.

It is no accident that artistic plant cultivation originated in China. The Chinese have always loved flowers and plants, and the country is naturally endowed with a rich diversity of flora. The Chinese also had a passion for gardens. In fact, many of these gardens were on a miniature scale and included many miniature trees and shrubs, planted to reinforce the scale and balance of their landscapes. The Chinese, however, were also infatuated in miniaturization as a science in its own right. They believed that miniature objects had concentrated within them certain mystical and magical powers.

The development of Chinese and Korean ceramics played an important role in the development of bonsai as we know it today. Without the development of beautiful Chinese containers, bonsai trees would not have been admired as much as they have been. Bonsai literally means “tree in a tray.” The tree and container must form a single entity. Even to this day the most desired containers for the finest Japanese bonsai are often antique Chinese containers.

Bonsai has evolved and developed along different lines in China and Japan. Chinese bonsai is still very much in the ancient tradition, and often appear “crude” to the uninformed. On the other hand, the Japanese styles are more pleasing and naturalistic. The Japanese trees are for the most part more refined and better groomed. Both types have their own individualistic charms and admirers.

In the post World War II era most of the bonsai seen in the United States and Europe are Japanese in origin. The monopoly that Japan has enjoyed until recently is coming to be shared with a number of other countries, although the quality of Japanese trees continues to be of the highest quality.

Finally, we owe a great debt to the Japanese and Chinese artists for developing this beautiful art and for keeping it alive for almost 2,500 years. Without their enthusiasm, artistic tradition, and patient stewardship, we would not be enjoying bonsai as we know it today. The aesthetic sensibilities of bonsai, which have their roots in the Zen Buddhist tradition, contribute significantly to the complete bonsai experience.

Introduction to the Art of Bonsai

The definition of the term "Bonsai" is a plant, usually a tree or shrub, that is grown in a container and made to look like a mature tree through the use of various training techniques. The plant usually does not exceed 1 meter in height. The art of Bonsai as we know it, traces back almost 2000 yrs. The word bonsai is made up of 2 Japanese characters or word phrases, "bon" & "sai", "Bon" is the pot, tray or container, the "sai" is the tree or potted planting. The word Bonsai equally applies to indoor and outdoor plants. The original word Bonsai comes from the Chinese word "P'en Tsai" it sounds similar to bonsai and has nearly the same meaning. It couldn't be further from the true spirit of bonsai if we restrict our interpretation in this way. It is indeed a tree in a pot, but a tree that has been subjected to a number of horticultural and aesthetic disciplines, through which visual harmony and botanical well being is achieved. The essence of classical Bonsai is to produce a healthy miniature representation of a tree.

The ultimate challenge for the Bonsai designer is to expose the essence of the tree. The art of Bonsai is telling a story through living illusion. The artist strives to find avenues for personal expression within the confines of good horticultural practice. Bonsai is a pleasant mix of form, thought, and suggestion, in a miniature world; and like all good art, it endures.

Beginners and students often share the same concern: having the ability to maintain a healthy plant. The key is in being able to control the degree of stress that a plant will take and still remain healthy. "Stress" here is not psychological stress, but referring to the horticultural practice of being able to know how much is too much, and how much is too little. This principal applies to all aspects to Bonsai culture, including air, water, soil, sun, nutrients, temperature, altitude, pruning, etc. The challenge is to have the willingness to learn, experiment and accept the results of these efforts. Another aspect central to Bonsai is time. The growth process takes time, and there are no shortcuts. A growing year is the usual yardstick by which success is measured. Caring for you Bonsai over time creates a deep sense of satisfaction. There is no replacement for time; it is always constant and moving forward. It is said that through the study of Bonsai, one will learn more than Bonsai.

Bonsai is about trees, trees grown in miniature. It is also about time and space and about life and attitudes. Historically, Bonsai was a part of the culture, an important part of family heritage. Equally, Bonsai can be simply a horticultural past time requiring no more than a measure of common garden sense, some artistic ability and plenty of patience.

Styles of Bonsai:

Formal Upright (chokkan)



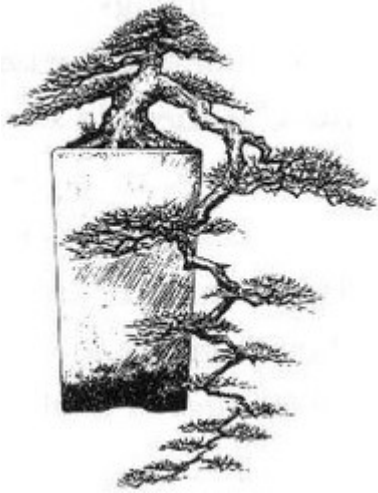
This style requires the tree to grow in a perfectly straight line upwards with a vertical taper where the base is visibly wider than the top. There should also be a visible nebari to complete the visual effect of a tree in nature that grows in open flat ground, without competition from other trees, and protected from strong winds. This style represents maturity, perfection, and timeless quality.

Informal Upright (moyogi)



Informal upright trees grow straight up but with delicate curves in the trunk (usually two or three). The first curve starts at the trunk which tilts at an angle. The remaining curves are spread out throughout the rest of the trunk. This is an ideal style for beginners. Trees well suited for the style include most species of trees, but specifically deciduous trees, flowering trees, maples, elms, and quince.

Cascade (Kengai)



Cascade style represents a tree growing on a cliff with branches flowing down (cascading) past the base of the tree. This style requires the tree to be grown in a pot that is placed on an elevated stand since the tree's branches extend past the base of the container. This style can be successfully achieved with junipers, yews, pines and other conifer bonsai. This style takes a lot of patience and dedication as the tree will naturally try to grow upwards.

Semi-Cascade (han kengai)



This style is similar to the cascade style. The difference is that the descending tree trunk doesn't normally go any lower than the base of the pot allowing the tree to be displayed on a flat table instead of a tall stand. This style symbolizes trees that grow over flowing water and rivers where the branches almost touch the water. This style can be used for most trees, but works best with junipers, yews, pines and other conifer bonsai.

Slanting (shakan)



Slanting style trees have trunks that slant dramatically to one side as if the tree was forced sideways by some natural phenomenon like strong wind, landslide, or knocked over by a fallen larger tree. This style has branches on both sides of the trunk. This is important to note, because this style is similar to Windswept, which features all the branches on one side.

Other styles to Consider

Broom Style (*Hokidachi*)

Driftwood Style (*Saramiki*)

Exposed Root Style (*Neagari*)

Group/Forest Style (*Yose*)

Landscape Style (*Bonkei*)

Literati Style (*Bunjingi*)

Raft Style (*Korabuki*)

Root in Rock (*Shitsuki*)

Root over Rock Style (*Sekijoju*)

Split Trunk Style (*Sabamiki*)

Triple Trunk Style (*Sankan*)

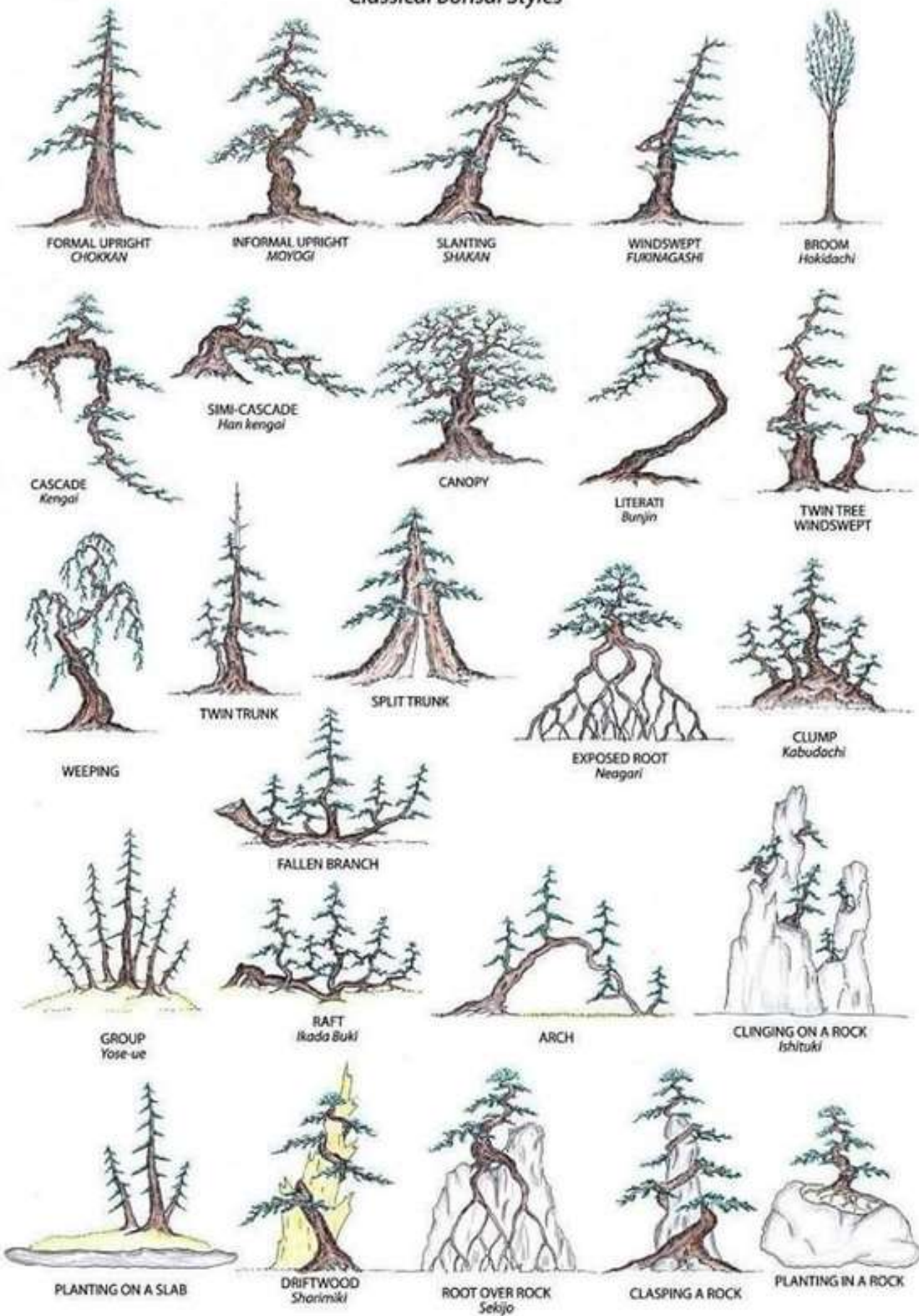
Twin Trunk Style (*Soju*)

Twisted Style (*Nejikan*)

Weeping Branch Style (*Shidare-Zukuri*)

Windswept Style (*Fukinagashi*)

Classical Bonsai Styles

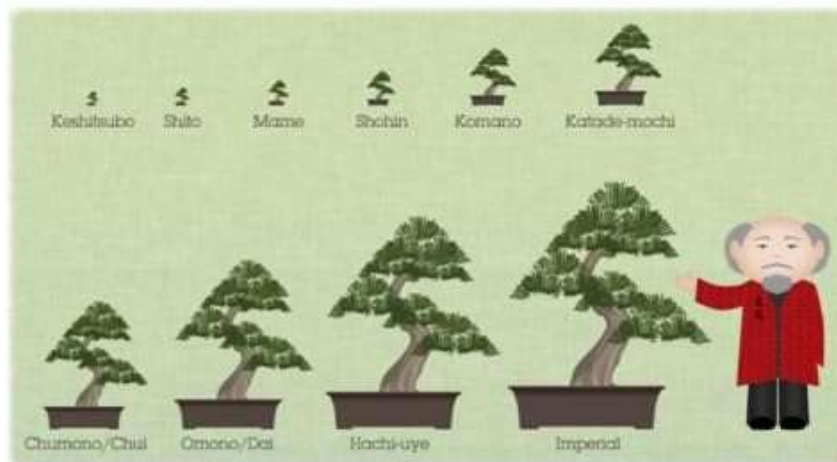


Bonsai Sizes

a more precise way. Several classifications of Bonsai have been put forward, and although the exact size classifications are disputed, they help to gain understanding of the aesthetic and botanical aspects of Bonsai. The classifications are originally based on the number of men needed to lift the actual tree.


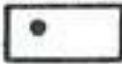


















The size classifications, increasing in size

Keshitsubo	1-3"	(3-8 cm)
Shito	2-4"	(5-10 cm)
Mame	2-6"	(5-15 cm)
Shohin	5-8"	(13-20 cm)
Komono	6-10"	(15-25 cm)
Katade-mochi	10-18"	(25-46 cm)
Chumono / Chiu	16-36"	(41-91 cm)
Omono / Dai	30-48"	(76-122 cm)
Hachi-uye	40-60"	(102-152 cm)
Imperial	60-80"	(152-203 cm)



Bonsai sizes illustrated

Pot Selection

Dish shapes		Position of tree in dish
rectangular dishes		
oval dishes		
square dishes		
round dishes		
tall square dishes		
tall round dishes		
lotus-style dish		
hexagonal or octagonal dishes		
flat slab with or without pedestal		
round flat dish		

Bonsai Soil



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LAST UPDATED SEPTEMBER 17, 2021

[Bonsai](#) may seem like just plants in pots, but they are so much more than that. The practice itself is more of an art that can take decades to perfect. While not the most interesting aspect of bonsai growing, soil for bonsai is an essential element. What is bonsai soil made up of? As with the art itself, bonsai soil requirements are exacting and very specific. The following article contains bonsai soil information on how to make your own bonsai soil.

Bonsai Soil Requirements

Soil for bonsai has to meet three different criteria: It must allow for good water retention, drainage, and aeration. The soil must be able to hold and retain sufficient moisture yet water must be able to drain immediately from the pot. The ingredients for bonsai soil must be large enough to allow for air pockets to provide oxygen to the roots and to microbacteria.

What is Bonsai Soil Made Up Of?

The common ingredients in bonsai soil are akadama, pumice, lava rock, organic potting compost, and fine gravel. Ideal bonsai soil should be pH neutral, neither acidic nor basic. A pH between 6.5 and 7.5 is ideal.

Bonsai Soil Information

Akadama is a hard-baked Japanese clay that is available online. After about two years, akadama begins to break down, which reduces aeration. This means that repotting is needed or that akadama should be used in a mix with well-draining soil components. Akadama is a bit costly, so it is sometimes substituted with fired/baked clays that are more readily available at garden centers. Even kitty litter is sometimes used in lieu of akadama.

Pumice is a soft volcanic product that absorbs both water and nutrients well. Lava rock helps retain water and adds structure to the bonsai soil.

Organic potting compost may be peat moss, perlite, and sand. It doesn't aerate or drain well and retains water but as a part of the soil mix it works. One of the more common options for organic compost for use in bonsai soil is pine bark because it breaks down slower than other types of compost; rapid breakdown can impede drainage.

Fine gravel or grit help with drainage and aeration and is used as the bottom layer of a bonsai pot. Some people do not use this anymore and just use a mix of akadama, pumice, and lava rock.

How to Make Bonsai Soil

The exact mix of bonsai soil is dependent on what type of tree species is being used. That said, here are guidelines for two types of soil, one for [deciduous trees](#) and one for [conifers](#).

- For deciduous bonsai trees use 50% akadama, 25% pumice, and 25% lava rock.
- For conifers use 33% akadama, 33% pumice, and 33% lava rock.

Depending upon your region's conditions, you may need to amend the soil differently. That is, if you do not check on the trees a couple of times a day, add more akadama or organic potting compost to the mix to increase water retention. If the climate in your area is wet, add more lava rock or grit to improve drainage.

Sift the dust from the akadama to improve aeration and drainage of the soil. Add the pumice to the mix. Then add the lava rock. If the lava rock is dusty, sift it as well prior to adding it to the mix.

If water absorption is important, add organic soil into the mix. This isn't always necessary, however. Usually, the above mix of akadama, pumice, and lava rock is sufficient.

Sometimes, getting soil for bonsai just right takes a little trial and error. Start with the basic recipe and keep a close eye on the tree. If drainage or aeration needs improvement, re-amend the soil.