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The baobab (*Adansonia Digitata*) is one of nature's more unusual looking trees, and there are many myths relating to this tree. A common mythological thread that runs through many cultures is that God, in anger, threw the tree out of heaven. It landed upside down, but still continued to grow with its roots in the air. This is why the baobab is often called the Upside Down Tree.

It is also called the Dead Rat Tree because the long oval fruit pods resemble dead rats hanging from the tree.

It is said that if one eats the flowers of a baobab one will in turn be eaten by a lion, but drinking the water tapped from a baobab trunk will prevent one from being devoured by crocodiles.

The name *Adansonia* was given to the tree in honor of the first white person to see the tree Michel Adanson, Senegal in about 1750.

In the wild almost every part of the baobab is utilized by both animals and humans. The seeds are rich in vitamin C and to a lesser degree vitamins A, B and D. They are eaten by birds, monkeys, bush babies and insects. Humans suck the white coating off the seeds and they can be roasted and turned into a drink much like coffee. The bark is in the form of long fibrous strips and can be used as ropes or as a fabric to make a wide variety of products including clothing.

Elephants are particularly fond of eating the bark and have been known to strip and devour entire trees in the space of a few days. In fact, elephants constitute a very real threat to the long-term survival of the tree in the wild. Baobabs are very slow growing trees, and are unable to reproduce and develop fast enough to grow to any considerable size before they are reduced to pulp by the voracious appetites of Jumbo.

Baobabs as bonsai:

The only hard and fast rule to growing baobabs as bonsai is that in winter they must receive NO water. In the wild these trees grow in areas that get rain perhaps once or twice a year in summer. Water is stored in the huge trunks and roots. The main reason that baobabs sometimes die when grown in pots is due to over-watering. My suggestion is that unless one lives in a very hot area, one should rather let the rain water your baobabs, although I have been told that growers in the Johannesburg and Pretoria areas do water their baobabs once a day during summer with no adverse affects.

It has become common practice for growers in this country to remove the tree entirely from its pot in winter. The roots are washed under a tap and then the tree is hung in a dark cool place like a garden shed for the duration of winter. The tree is then repotted at the beginning of spring once more. A less drastic approach is to simply move the tree, in its pot, to an area where it will not get wet by dew or the occasional winter rainstorm. Wet roots in winter will cause root-rot.

With most bonsai the first step in repotting is to remove the tree's taproot, but this would be an error when working with baobabs. A baobab should be left to grow in quite deep soil until it reaches the desired width, and only then should one remove the tap root. The roots of this tree do not have a fine network of hair roots as do most trees, and it gets almost all of its nutrients through the taproot. Remove the taproot just before repotting in spring. The cut should be sealed using Flowers of Sulphur, a powder available from pharmacies.

Strangely enough, although in the wild the tree grows in quite arid areas they do thrive if given a fair amount of plant food. As a result of the feeding the leaves will grow quite large, but this is not really a problem. Unlike most bonsai where foliage is an important feature, baobabs are always displayed without the leaves, and look best in winter when they have shed their leaves. The trunk of a baobab is the key feature and this will be accentuated by the bare branches.

It is important to note that it is very difficult to imitate the splendor of a wild baobab in a bonsai. Young baobabs do not really look much like the fully grown trees in the wild which are shaped by perhaps thousands of years of toil, and most baobabs in pots seem to retain some of the juvenile characteristics, but they are still marvelous subjects, and most bonsai collectors have at least one in their collection.

Lastly, the baobab is a VERY slow growing tree, so don't expect overnight success with this species. They can be grown from seed but best results are achieved by hunting down an already established plant from a nursery. I have read quite a few methods for germinating the seeds. Some people soak the seeds overnight in water. Others remove the white fuzzy outer coating of the seed with sandpaper or a sharp knife. I have even read of somebody using an electric grindstone to cut a notch in the hard inner shell.

I did none of the above. I simply planted my seeds and about half of them germinated, but perhaps I was just lucky.