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Bonsai Pots

The container in which a bonsai lives is an essential and critical factor in both the development and display of the tree. A stunning tree that is displayed in an unsuitable pot will fall well short of its potential. Conversely, an average tree can be vastly improved by being displayed in a well-chosen container.

Bonsai can be, and are displayed in a huge variety of containers, from pieces of slate to very expensive ceramic pots imported from China and Japan. Historically, the style and colour of a pot would indicate from where in China it originated, and from what time period, and potters and bonsai artists from those periods kept quite rigidly within the style constraints of that specific period. Modern bonsai practitioners are a lot less formal in their choice of containers, and many even make their own containers from fiberglass or quick-drying cement.

The physical requirements of a bonsai container are fairly straight forward. It must hold sufficient soil to keep the plant alive and it must have large enough drainage holes to allow the soil to drain fast enough to prevent the roots from becoming water logged and consequently rotting. It is also important to realize that the reduction in the size of a tree's leaves is achieved largely by restricting root growth so if your pot is too large the tree's leaves will not reduce. This is referred to as over-potting. Often trees are deliberately over-potted and after a few years they develop to suit their pot and only then do the leaves reduce. Many of the South African tree species, notably Acacia, prefer deeper soil than bonsai from Japan and China.

Selecting the style of pot from an aesthetic point of view is not an easy process. There are so many rules that govern the style and shapes of miniature trees so why should there not be a whole host of rules governing one's choice of pot? Here are some basic pointers to assist you in selecting pots but remember they are just suggestions and every tree should be considered separately.

The depth of the pot should be the same as the thickness of the base of the trunk, called the Nebari. This point introduces the concept of masculine and feminine trees. Masculine trees are those with thick trunks and solid chunky shapes a bit like a wrestler, baobabs, olives (*olea europaea*) and wild figs. Feminine trees are more elegant in shape and have graceful flowing lines more like a ballerina or a super model with anorexia. Willows, tea trees and White Stinkwood (*Celtis africana*) are generally more feminine and would look better in shallow pots or trays. Cascades and semi-cascades are always planted in deep pots.

For most upright styles, the crown of the tree should not extend beyond the rim of the pot. Again, this is just a guideline, and if a tree has a particularly long side branch one might deliberately extend it beyond the rim to draw attention to it.

The pot must never overpower the tree visually. Always remember that the tree is the most important aspect of your composition.

Trees with gentle flowing shapes and round crowns are best displayed in round or oval pots. Pots with sharp edges, square or rectangular, should only be used for trees with sharp angular lines and powerful trunks. This is because any straight line or corner on a pot creates a strong focal point and a viewer's eye will invariably be drawn away from the tree to the pot.

Choosing the colour of the container is as important as choosing the shape. The colour of the pot should either blend in with the tree or contrast with it. Earth colours are fairly safe because most trees will at some point have green foliage and an earthy coloured pot will enhance the green leaves. Terracotta is a good colour for evergreen trees, and beige or sand coloured pots are good for deciduous trees because they will not overpower the tree in winter when it has lost its leaves. Pots for flowering trees must be selected with more care and the colour of the flowers and fruit must be considered when doing so. Flowering trees generally are best displayed in round or oval pots. It is a very good idea to wait until the tree is in flower before selecting its pot. Take the tree with you to your pot supplier and place it next to, or in the various pots until you find one that is suitable. This is recommended for any tree actually, not just ones with flowers.

A bonsai pot can be an expensive item, and in many cases will cost a lot more than the financial value of the tree one is going to put into it. It should be noted however that planting a bonsai into a fancy pot is actually the last step in a long process. Bonsai are generally cultivated in black nursery bags, plastic basins or in the ground in flowerbeds. Only when a tree has developed to a point that it will be displayed will it be potted. It should then be able to live in that pot for many years and only occasionally will it be repotted into a slightly larger pot. I have more than 400 trees and only about 20 of them are in pots. I also have a small collection of pots without trees and I am waiting for certain of my trees to develop to a point when I can put them into these pots. I make this last point to show that one does not need bundles of money to enjoy bonsai.