

All the articles on this page also appeared in [The Gardiner](#) magazine, was written by [Gary English](#) and published with his kind permission..

© Gary English [gary@cybersmith.co.za](mailto:gary@cybersmith.co.za)

© The Gardener Magazine - Editor: Tanya Visser [tanya@thegardener.co.za](mailto:tanya@thegardener.co.za)

### *History*

One of the main motivations behind the writing of these bonsai articles is to attempt to demystify the art form, and to make readers feel less self conscious about their own creations. A good way to gain some awareness of bonsai is to read a bit about the history or should I say, the roots of the art form.

What we know of as a Japanese art form is actually Chinese originally, and was exported to Japan in about 1350 by Buddhist monks. In 1878 bonsai were introduced to Europe at the Paris Global Exhibition. As you can imagine, they went down like turkey at Christmas, and within a few short years the popularity of bonsai had spread across the western world.

But the Chinese did not simply ? invent? bonsai overnight. In fact the art of planting trees and plants in pots goes back as far as recorded history. Scenes depicted on temple walls in ancient Egypt show plants in pots. Ancient Indian medicine men were known to plant rare and hard to find herbs in pots to keep a supply close at hand. However, it is generally accepted that many of the basic principles of our art were formulated by the Chinese. The Chinese also attached spiritual ? superstitions? to their trees. It was good luck to give a person a flowering Apricot bonsai. A large bonsai with welcoming arms in the foyer or reception hall of a house was a very desirable item for any wealthy Chinese household. The Chinese also practiced other forms of ? living art? . Entire landscape scenes, Penjing were planted. These reflected the visually striking mountains of the vast country. Rock plantings are another of China? s many contributions. The Chinese admired rocks for their variety and beauty. Rocks with striations represent rivers and waterfalls, tall rocks appear as mountain peaks when combined with well chosen pebbles, and when positioned by a real artist on a sheet of glass, a scene of true beauty can be created.

The Chinese development spanned many hundreds of years, a few thousand actually. Through the various periods various styles became popular, and at times some of the styles became grotesquely gnarled and twisted. Fortunately the less attractive styles lost popularity and fell away. Today Chinese bonsai, or Penzai as it was originally known, still reflects some of the more elaborate and fanciful nuances of its distant past. The Chinese seem to concentrate on enhancing a tree? s natural shape rather than reshaping a tree to fit into a set of prescribed formulae which seems to be the Japanese approach. This is purely my opinion.

So, about 600 years ago some Buddhist monks brought the art of Penzai to Japan, and the Japanese called it Bonsai, and they thought it was pretty cool because they had a lot less real estate than China, and because the Japs are good at miniaturization, bonsai was a hit. Of course the Japanese also had to develop their own styles or schools, and practitioners of the art generally remained faithfully within the limitations of their own school. There were times when there was great friction between the various schools, disagreements on the correct way to style a tree etc, and it was only at the beginning of the 20th century that any real attempt was made to group all of the schools under one umbrella called bonsai.

Bonsai instruction traditionally had been a longwinded affair. An apprentice would spend 4 years watering trees before he was allowed to cut anything. Then a further 4 years of pruning instruction from the master before embarking on another 4 years of styling. The west was beginning to demand a more ? fast food? approach to bonsai, and largely due to this demand, a specialist bonsai magazine saw publication in 1910 in Japan. It only ran for about 3 years but the seeds had already been sown, the veil had been lifted and many of the trade secrets had become fairly common knowledge.

I have somewhere between 300 and 400 trees in plastic pots and black nursery bags. Some of them are more Chinese in style, some will fit into the Japanese category, some are just trees. I am not concerned. I don? t like too many rules anyway. I just like to look at my trees, and they are all precious.