

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

© Gary English gary@cybersmith.co.za

© The Gardener Magazine - Editor: Tanya Visser tanya@thegardener.co.za

Introduction to Bonsai

In their most literal sense the two words bon-sai mean "plant in a tray" in Japanese, but it is more widely understood as the art of creating miniature trees which give the illusion of a full sized tree in its natural environment.

The art of bonsai can be traced back almost 3 000 years to ancient China. Thought to have been introduced to Japan by Buddhist monks in the sixth century, the art evolved in time and was introduced to the West at exhibitions in Paris and London between 1878 and 1909. Collections of established bonsai began to appear, but the oriental method of learning by 'hands-on' experience created the impression that there were 'secret methods' of controlling the size of the trees. After the establishment and publishing of basic 'rules' for bonsai, which detailed groups, or styles, according to trunk shape and branch placement, the art spread through the West. Like most art forms, bonsai is a combination of artistic ability and knowledge of technical methods. There has been a huge resurgence of interest in bonsai in this country over the last few years.

One of the most heard fallacies is that bonsai is cruel. To the uninitiated it may seem that to prune branches and roots, and to wire and bend other branches causes undue stress to the plant. In their natural environment trees are subject to all the violent forces of nature, they are browsed by animals, chewed up by white ants, struck by lightning and are often subject to long periods without water, especially in South Africa. These are factors that shape a tree in nature, all the bonsai artist does is replicate these natural forces. One can also argue that if bonsai were harmful to the tree it would not live very long, but many bonsai outlive their natural counterparts.

The art of bonsai is the antithesis to the rush and pressures of our daily slog. Many people find it an ideal way of relaxing after a long day at work. Results are not achieved by lunchtime, or even by next Monday morning's production meeting. Nothing is instant, the artwork develops slowly over months and years. Bonsai teach us patience, and instill in us the importance of planning for the future. It is a healthy pass-time, one which achieves fascinating results. The starting point is learning to care for plants in a limited amount of fast draining soil, and follow a few simple instructions. Don't get put off by the technicalities, don't stress if a branch is in the wrong place, or if your tree doesn't conform to any particular style. Enjoy every plant for its own special characteristics and most of all remember, you are the one who looks at your tree all the time, it does not matter what anybody else thinks about it.

Unfortunately, the apparent complexity of bonsai tends to discourage novices, so we will try to simplify the mass of information that is available. and hopefully plant the seeds of inspiration that will enable you all to experience the rich fulfillment of the art of bonsai.