

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

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

Junipers

As a patriotic South African I am very proud of the huge variety of plant species indigenous to this country. South African trees are great for creating the African styles, the flat top, the Piemeef style and the baobab style. These are all styles which one finds in the wild in the southern hemisphere. But bonsai developed in the northern hemisphere, and trees from the north have a different shape. They are generally tall and pointed to cope with snow, unlike bushveld trees which are flat to provide shade for animals.

The most common species for bonsai in the north are conifers. The conifer family is huge, and includes pines and junipers, each of which has many varieties. We are going to concentrate on the junipers for the moment.

Junipers are wonderful plants for bonsai as they enable us to style trees which look like the traditional bonsai from the north. Not all juniper species are suited to bonsai, but many are, and there is nothing stopping you from experimenting with different species.

Some of the more common species are Juniperus procumbens nana, J horizontalis and J chinensis. These species are used mostly as ground cover or borders for flower beds as they remain fairly small and have a tendency to grow side wards or down. They have small, tightly packed leaves, procumbent meaning ? lying down? and nana meaning ? small leafed? . I would suggest beginning with the procumbens nana.

There are a few ground rules to follow when working with these trees. They are evergreen, and one should **NEVER** remove ALL of their leaves. Actually the more foliage the faster the tree will grow, so any major pruning should be done in stages. When reducing the leaf area, one should use one's fingers to nip the buds off, rather than scissors. This simulates the browsing of animals and stimulates further leaf growth. Use tools on the thicker bits.

The leaves require light to grow. When the leaf pads become really dense, the foliage deep inside the leaf pad will die off and become brown. Rub the leaf pads vigorously to remove the dead brown bits, and to make space for light to penetrate the leaf pad.

I think the most interesting fact about conifers is that they are very primitive plants, and they are unable to process nutrients in the soil in their raw state. Instead they have a symbiotic relationship with small organisms in the soil called mycorrhizal fungi that convert the nutrients into a form that the tree can absorb. It is therefore quite important that, when repotting junipers, you include some soil from the old pot. This soil will already contain fungi, and will enable the plant to recover much quicker. Also plant your juniper cuttings into soil which has mycorrhizal fungi, they will stand a much better chance of developing new roots. Cuttings like company so plant many together in a pot of coarse sand.

Actually mycorrhizal fungi assist in the growth of almost all plants, but they are not essential for most trees, conifers being one of the exceptions.

Junipers are dioecious. This means that the fruit will form on the female plant and the pollen is produced by the male plants. It would therefore be a good idea to buy more than just one of a species. If you are lucky enough to get both male and female plants, fruit may develop after a couple of years.

Procumbens nana is very well suited to the cascade style as it has a natural tendency to grow down, but if it is planted as an upright style this tendency will cause the side branches to droop down which is very desirable for bonsai because this is what happens to the branches of trees under the weight of snow.

Lastly, procumbens nana is about the only juniper which will grow well within a few kilometers of the ocean because they seem to cope with the salt air better.

So, next weekend nip off to your nearest nursery and get hold of a couple of junipers, they will be a worthy addition to your bonsai collection, but be warned, they are quite slow growing plants so don't expect overnight results. Bonsai is a long-term investment and demands patience.