

INTRODUCTION to BONSAI - by Jonathan Cain

So often I hear that bonsai are difficult to keep alive. This statement is paramount for keeping any plant. Bonsai is 80% horticultural principles and 20% artistic principles. So keeping you bonsai alive involves knowing how the species grows and whether it is endemic to your area. Trees that do not grow in your area are going to need extra attention and knowledge. The most important element remains to be water, followed by light.

WHAT IS BONSAI?

Meaning

The literal translation of the word "bonsai" is "bon" being a bowl and "sai" meaning "to plant". It can be interpreted as a planting in a bowl. The Chinese version "penjing" can be translated as "artistic pot plant", which is perhaps more descriptive of what bonsai is all about.

Modern definition.

Bonsai is more than just a small tree in a container, or pot. It is also more than just a miniaturised version of a tree as seen in nature. It is an artistic rendering of such a tree. However, while it can be regarded as a true art form a living sculpture, it can also be regarded as merely a hobby.

Hobby

Regarding it as a hobby, newcomers to bonsai culture are often satisfied to accept a very ordinary-looking tree in a pot, as a bonsai. However as the grower perseveres and progresses with bonsai, culture improves and a more critical judgement is taken on what comes a true bonsai. Therein lies the real joy of growing bonsai, the more you work at it - the better your efforts turn out.

Origin

It is mooted that the origins may have started in The Hanging gardens of Babelyon in about 600 B.C. The ancient nomads (Ayurveda system of medicine) kept important trees, shrubs and herbs in containers, for mobility or the benefit of their medicinal properties being their leaves, roots and bark. By 400 AD the Ayurveda works were translated into Chinese and by 700 AD penjing was recorded in China among the nobles and priests in the form of miniature landscapes for religious purposes. Between the 7th and the 13th century this knowledge was taken from China to the Japanese via migrating Buddhists. The Japanese refined the art to what we understand it today. Bonsai was introduced in 1897 into the west, being Paris France in the form of an exhibition. It was not until the end of WW2, when the returning veterans brought back knowledge and specimens of this art that bonsai started gaining wide spread and commercial interest.

In South Africa the first bonsai were displayed at the British Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg in 1933.

Size classifications:

Exact sizes for each individual class varies from one authority to another; those below are taken from the 20th Grand View Bonsai Exhibition / Nippon Bonsai Taikan-ten.

MAME bonsai less than 7cm in height

SHOHIN bonsai up to 20cm in height

KIFU bonsai between 20 and 40cm in height

CHU bonsai between 40 and 60 cm in height

DAI bonsai over 60cm in height