

FOR THE
GARDEN

Gardening With Bonsai

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Photos by Michael Woodall

Bonsai gardeners Carol and Ken Roberts enjoy trimming a mature elm tree.



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SCOTTSDALE GARDENERS CAROL AND KEN ROBERTS EXPLORE THE ART AND SCIENCE OF BONSAI

Bonsai is believed to have originated thousands of years ago in Asia. Practiced to this day, it is a form of gardening that adapts surprisingly well to the low desert's dry climate.

For Scottsdale residents Carol and Ken Roberts, bonsai suits their lifestyle. "As Carol and I neared retirement, we knew that we needed to find activities we both enjoyed," says Ken. "We grew up in Wyoming with families who gardened, and we always enjoyed tending our own landscapes," Carol adds. "Bonsai seemed like a good fit for us because it combines horticultural and artistic elements."

Bonsai (pronounced bone sigh) is the Japanese art of growing miniaturized trees or woody shrubs in shallow containers. The designer keeps plants small by restricting roots and selective pruning. Bonsai evokes the appearance of weathered trees surviving in the wild. To achieve this natural effect, gardeners expose roots, scar bark, and wire branches to force them to hang down, and perhaps kill an individual branch.

Detailed guidelines explain bonsai protocol, including plant types, notes Carol. Elephant's food (*Portulacaria afra*), which thrives in the Phoenix area, is one of the few succulent plants allowed, although many woody plants can be trained as bonsai. In the low desert, bougainvillea, elm, juniper and olive trees are commonly used, as well as natives such as bursera, palo brea and palo verde.

Other guidelines cover the number and placement of branches, where the first branch should be, plus pot style, size and color in relation to its plant. Pots and plants are described as "masculine" or "feminine." For example, a square pot with sharp corners is masculine, whereas an oval pot with soft curves is feminine.

Bonsai plant sizes range from diminutive mame, which are no taller than six inches, up to "four-man bonsai," meaning four men are needed to carry it. Anything larger than about 40 inches high is not classified as bonsai, says Ken.

Guidelines provide a place for beginners to absorb the subtleties of bonsai design, although Arizona practitioners deal with challenging climate conditions that allow some rule-bending. For example, bonsai pots typically are very shallow. "In the desert, we tend to use pots that are a little deeper, to deal with the realities of our climate," Ken explains. "Otherwise, with our high heat and low humidity, a thin layer of soil in an extremely shallow pot would get so hot that the roots would broil. Even in deeper pots, soil dries out so fast that we often water twice daily during summer."

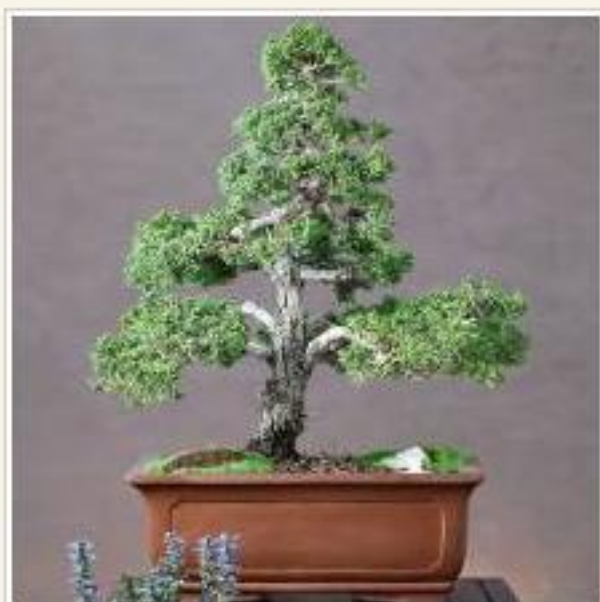
All of the couple's bonsai trees live outdoors year-round. They protect most of their collection from the desert sun beneath an Asian-inspired lattice shade structure that Ken designed for their backyard. They situate other selected bonsai, such as a native palo verde tree, around the swimming pool as living sculpture among colorful landscape plants and outdoor art.



An elephant's food plant (*Portulacaria afra*) grows in a shallow bonsai tray. It is frost-sensitive, so the couple places the bonsai in the garage during evenings when the temperature is projected to be below 35 degrees.

To contend with the lack of humidity, the gardeners set their bonsai on humidity trays. "We fill galvanized metal trays with fine gravel, then add water so the gravel is very moist," Ken explains. As water evaporates, trees receive a bit of cooling and increased humidity. It is essential that the trees sit on the moist gravel, but not in water, he says, because the soil would soak up water through the pot's drainage holes, roots would rot and the plant would die. "The most likely cause of bonsai death is soil that retains too much water," Ken cautions.

The couple confesses to having killed a few plants when they first got started. To learn the nuances of bonsai style and care, they joined the Phoenix Bonsai Society in 2003. "We are by no means experts, but we have learned a lot from other members, including our club's world-renowned bonsai master, Ben Oki," says Ken. Oki is curator of the Bonsai Collections at the Huntington Library and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California. Ken and Carol also receive mentoring three times per year from Cindy Read, past president of the San Diego Bonsai Club. She helps to trim and work their collection of bonsai trees when she visits.



This formal display consists of a juniper tree on a stand and a violet-flowering carpet bugle plant.

In their landscape, Carol and Ken have enjoyed tending "legacy" plants passed along from family members, including Sansevieria from Carol's grandmother and Euphorbia and yucca from her aunt. The couple's bonsai collection also fits this practice because bonsai specimens are passed along as living legacies. "We were fortunate to visit Japan on a tour with Ben Oki, where we met people with trees that have remained in their families for hundreds of years," Ken comments. "It's important to these owners that the trees continue to exist beyond them."

"It's considered an honor to care for bonsai that belonged to someone else," adds Carol. Such plants may carry the name of their original designer or previous owner. The couple purchased two trees, a masculine juniper and feminine catlin elm, at auction. Their owners could no longer care for the large trees, which are 36 inches high and between 34 and 50 pounds. The two had been members of the

Scottsdale Bonsai Society, "and we refer to their plants by their names, Mr. and Mrs. Brun," says Carol. "The plants came with 67 years' worth of notes on their care."

Bonsai offers a good training ground for developing patience, note the gardeners. Ken has been working with a foothills palo verde seedling he plucked from the ground seven years ago. "Its trunk is as big around as my thumb," he says. His design goal is to keep it less than 8 inches tall, a style known as shohin.



Photos - Clock-wise from top left: Olive bonsai trees grow well in the Phoenix area. Here, they create a small grove planting in the large pot; the smaller container has a single olive bonsai tree. ▪ Carol and Ken Roberts have a number of small bonsai trees, called shohin, which are less than 8 inches in height, including boxwood, elm, ficus, olive and palo verde. ▪ Carol tends her kusamono collection in a shady area of the yard. A kusamono is a collection of various seasonal plantings used to indicate what the current season is when shown with a tree such as a juniper that looks the same all year. A kusamono will look different each season as plants mature and bloom, or go dormant. ▪ This small bonsai tree, approximately 8 inches tall, is a native foothills palo verde. The tree is displayed with a small cactus as an accent plant. ▪

Photos - Clock-wise from top left: Ken Roberts designed this lattice structure, which houses the couple's bonsai collection year-round. ▪ Copper-coated aluminum wire is used to train branches to grow in desired directions and shapes. Wire is removed once the direction of a branch has been established. ▪ Specialized bonsai tools are used to perform small trimming tasks, remove large branches, cut individual leaves, and cut and bend wires that are placed on trunks or branches to help shape the direction of a tree's growth. ▪ Carol and Ken Roberts refer to the elm on the left as Mrs. Brun and the juniper on the right as Mr. Brun, after their original owners.

The gardeners agree that bonsai is both a stimulating and relaxing pursuit for retirement. "Recently, an arborist arrived at our neighbor's house to trim all the landscape trees," recalls Carol. "At the same time, Ken started to trim one of his bonsai. The arborist finished his job and left, but Ken was still trimming that same plant. It's so easy to become engrossed with bonsai that time just disappears."

Phoenix Bonsai Society meets the first three Tuesdays of the month, September through May, at 7:30 p.m. at Valley Garden Center, 1809 N. 15th Ave., Phoenix. Visitors are welcome. The club will hold its first bonsai show in April 2011. For more information, log on to phoenixbonsai.com.



Carol practices the art of kusamono, delicate arrangements of wild grasses and flowers grown in shallow trays or pots. Kusamono initially accompanied bonsai displays but now is recognized as an art form in its own right. Arrangements depict distinct native habitats, such as meadows or wetlands, in a particular season. They also may be planted to showcase seasonal changes, such as Carol's meadow kusamono, which has survived four years. It contains grasses, flowering bulbs, succulents, desert wildflowers, ferns and mosses, and represents all the seasons.

