

## Welcome to the World of Bonsai!

It is our hope and goal at the Phoenix Bonsai Society to help guide you through the initiation steps of bonsai. As a beginner, this process often feels difficult when first starting out in the art of Bonsai.

Most people become interested in Bonsai because they were given or purchased a “little tree” at some point. These people usually fall into two categories...

Those whose trees survived and are gung-ho, ready to become “Masters,” but more often than not, most of us fall into the second category. We love our little trees, put time and energy into it, and it DIED! Scratching our heads with frustration, we want to know why? With our weekly available mentors and workshops, we can give you the best advice and guidance to make this a successful hobby for you.

Although Bonsai is an art form that has been studied and practiced for many centuries, don't be intimidated; you are perfectly capable of enjoying this hobby.

Some very simple guidelines will get you started, and from there you can build a foundation that will enable you to take a good tree to an amazing work of art.

### **1. Start with beginner material for your area.**

Phoenix is considered a “Lush Desert.” We are in a challenging area as far as the heat of summer, and bonsai availability, but that trade off also allows us to do a wide assortment of unusual trees. Our creativity has served us well as many beautiful successful bonsai have been created out of non-typical material. Non-traditional desert trees have proven to be high quality works of art. Some easy material to start on, but not limited by imagination could be:

Vitex	Natal Plum
Portulacaria	Hackberry
Ficus	Juniper
Elm	Fukien Tea
Bougainvillea	Boxwood
Olive	Desert Rose

*Bonsai is both Aesthetics and Horticulture. If you can't keep it alive, nothing else matters!*

## **2. Find a Tree**

Most people think Bonsai are little species of trees that grow into a bonsai. The exact opposite is true. A larger tree cut back will make a better bonsai in shorter time. A selection of Nursery stock or Pre-bonsai (rough material with "Potential") is a first choice. Pre-bonsai will most likely have to be ordered or found at a bonsai nursery. Ready made bonsai can be purchased, but you will pay a hefty price for it. As a beginner you risk losing your money, and a lovely tree. Next, decide if you want an indoor vs. outdoor tree. Most bonsai are grown outdoors, with limited varieties that can be solely grown indoors. Know that each tree species has different and specific requirements. (ie; shade loving vs. full sun. etc.) Know where you are placing your trees. One hot day in the sun for a shade-loving tree can cause certain demise! Most trees will require shade cloth, or some type of cover during the summer months in the regional Phoenix area.

*"Bonsai is by far one of the hardest Art forms"- Unlike a picture or sculpture- "It is always changing and never finished."*

## **3. Soil**

Bonsai trees have different soil compared to other plants. It needs to be well draining so your trees don't rot and can develop good root structure. We are asking a lot by keeping our trees in a small pot, some days the pots can get so hot it burns our hands to pick them up. Our trees work hard to stay alive in Phoenix, so a good soil is imperative. If you ask 5 different bonsaists what soil mix they use, you will get 5 different answers. It is a very controversial subject. Just know the basic mix is (1-2 part Scoria: 1 part pumice: 1 part Akadama.) This 3:1 mix is the soil we recommend and promote in the club. Most people in the bonsai business also know it as "Boon Mix." The most important being Scoria or sifted small particles of volcanic rock. Once transferring a tree to this soil, you will have to monitor watering, remember it is free draining now. (ie. water more.)

*An old bonsai proverb states:  
"Water once for the tree, once for the pot, once for the soil."*

## **4. Pots**

Bonsai should be transferred to a series of "grow pots," as the tree develops. Only after it has entered its refined stage, should it be transferred to a permanent suitable pot. Once a finished tree, or any tree for that matter, is put in a small pot, growth will be restricted dramatically. Refined Bonsai are treated differently than developing bonsai. This is one of the hardest concepts to accept. Many want a finished tree immediately. Rarely would this happen.

Bonsai need to be wired into their shallow pots. Screen is used to impede the soil mix from pouring out the bottom holes.

Bonsai pots need to be oiled. Phoenix water can have your pot with calcium build up in no time. Mineral oil or even vegetable oil from your kitchen cupboard is cheap and sufficient.

Oil only the outside of the pot. Show pots are always oiled. Glazed pots can be oiled but slippery. Be careful.

## **5. Styling and Pruning**

What style is your tree?

Cascade

Informal/formal upright

Broom

Windswept

Raft

Find a front to your tree. All bonsai are shown with a “best side.” Consider Nebari, (Beautiful flaring at the root structure). Also consider movement from the main trunk to potentiate the best look the tree has. A tree should come towards the viewer, not away. Most foliage should be in the back, the front being more open as if to draw the viewer into the tree.

Remove any obvious “eye-sores”. Which would include dead branches. (make sure your trees NOT dormant.) Also, crossing or rubbing branches, and “bar branches.” (branches side by side on the main trunk.)

Trim back to first branch or leaf internode. This produces better “ramification”. (The beautiful branch structure or scaffolding of a tree.) Choose a style that best fits the growth of the tree. (i.e. Don’t make a cascade style from a tree that has strong upward growth.)

Think triangle when shaping a bonsai. But remember, there are many types of triangles. One will surely fit your trees circumstance.

## **6. Wiring**

There are two types of wire (annealed copper and aluminum) in many different gauges (Sizes) Just remember, bigger branch- bigger wire. Many people choose not to wire. But I can assure you; it is the single most important technique aside from trimming, which can take an ordinary tree into a fantastic bonsai. If your taking time to wire, make sure and “set” your branches into a pleasing pattern. Make sure the wire is strong enough to hold the branch in the new position.

## **7. Tools of the Trade**

Bonsai artists have come up with a lot of different tools over the years, but only a few are needed to start the hobby. These come in beginner, intermediate, and Master series. Stainless tools are available, but many claim that they don’t hold an edge as well. A mid-grade (intermediate), non-stainless high carbon steel tool is the best value.

\*Tools are listed in order of importance:

- Concave cutter
- Scissors- Kiri style- (or bud/pine style.) This type of scissors provides precision cutting without large bulky handles.
- Pliers
- Turntable
- Tweezers
- Knob cutters
- Wire cutters
- Soil Sieve- Includes 3 screens- will produce 3 different size scoria.

These tools can be purchased online or with local vendors. Many choose to get by with hardware store variety until they are ready to commit.

In conclusion, with the small amount of the interest you've developed, these beginning tips should help improve your ability to move onto the next step. It's to your advantage to surround yourself with people that are interested in the same hobby. Often you will be told, read and hear, that by joining a club, your bonsai, and your experiences with bonsai will exceed what you ever thought possible. Our Mentors are available at every meeting; bring your tree in, as it is always helpful to get another opinion. Remember.... Great minds think alike, and your bonsai ideas may be right on track!

Thank you for taking the time to read this information and giving us the opportunity to share with you why we love Bonsai!

Sincerely,

Jenna Williams  
Educational Director

*"Bonsai is not a race – nor a destination. Bonsai is a never ending Journey."*

## **NOTES**

### Sources:

Bonsai4me.com

Miraibonsai.com

BonsaiEmpire.com

Kaizenbonsai.com

\*Jennifer M. Williams/Bonsai Queen/

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