

Phoenix Bonsai Society Beginner Guide

Starting out in bonsai can feel overwhelming, but our goal is to guide you through the process and help you enjoy this rewarding art form. Many people discover bonsai after receiving or purchasing a small tree. Beginners often fall into two groups:

- Those whose trees have survived and are eager to become “masters.”
- Those who loved their tree, invested time and energy, but watched it die — and now want to understand why.

With the help of our mentors, we can provide the advice and support you need to make bonsai a successful and enjoyable hobby. Remember: bonsai is first horticulture, then aesthetics. If you can't keep the tree alive, nothing else matters!

1. Start with Beginner-Friendly Material

Phoenix is considered a “lush desert.” While our summers are hot and bonsai availability can be limited, the climate also allows us to grow tropical species. Creativity has led to many beautiful bonsai made from non-traditional desert trees.

Some good beginner options include:

- Portulacaria
- Premna
- Ficus
- Pomegranate
- Elm
- Fukien Tea
- Bougainvillea
- Texas Sage
- Olive
- Bursera
- Natal Plum
- Vitex (Arabian Lilac)

2. Soil

Bonsai soil must be well-draining to prevent root rot and encourage strong root development. In Phoenix, pots can get so hot they burn your hands, so soil quality is critical. Our club recommends a basic mix: **1–2 parts scoria, 1 part pumice, and 1 part akadama**. This is commonly known as the “3:1 Mix” or “Boon’s Mix.”

- Scoria (volcanic rock) is the most important component.
- Pumice makes the soil lighter and more porous.
- Akadama (fired clay) improves water retention and structure.

Sift all components into ½, ¼, or ⅛-inch particles. Large sifters are available at BonsaiTonight.com.

Proverb: *“Water once for the tree, once for the pot, once for the soil.”*

3. Finding a Tree

Bonsai are not a special species of miniature trees. In fact, larger trees cut back often make better bonsai in less time.

Options include:

- **Nursery stock or pre-bonsai:** Rough material with potential.
- **Ready-made bonsai:** Beautiful but expensive, and risky for beginners.

Decide whether you want an indoor or outdoor tree. Most bonsai thrive outdoors, but some species can adapt indoors. Know your tree’s specific needs (shade vs. sun, winter vs. summer exposure). In Phoenix, shade cloth or cover is often required in summer.

Tip: Transfer a tree to a bonsai pot only after it has matured. Growth slows dramatically in small pots.

4. Styling and Pruning

Choose a style that suits your tree’s natural growth. A few options are:

- Cascade
- Informal/Formal Upright
- Broom
- Windswept
- Raft

Guidelines:

- Select a “front” for your tree — the side that best highlights its trunk and root flare (nebari).
- Remove dead, crossing, or rubbing branches.
- Trim back to the first branch or leaf internode to encourage ramification (fine branching).
- Shape with triangular forms, but adapt the triangle to your tree’s character.

5. Wiring

Wiring is one of the most important techniques for shaping bonsai.

- Use annealed copper or aluminum wire in various gauges.
- Match wire thickness to branch size.
- Proper wiring can transform an ordinary tree into a striking bonsai.

6. Tools of the Trade

You don't need every tool to start. A few essentials will serve you well:

- Concave cutter
- Precision scissors (Kiri or bud/pine style)
- Pliers
- Turntable
- Tweezers
- Knob cutters
- Soil sieve (with ½, ¼, and ⅛-inch screens)

Mid-grade high-carbon steel tools are the best value. Stainless steel is durable but often doesn't hold an edge as well. Beginners may use hardware store tools until ready to invest.

7. Conclusion

With these beginner tips, you'll be ready to take the next step in your bonsai journey. Surround yourself with fellow enthusiasts — joining a club accelerates learning and enjoyment.

- Mentors are available at every meeting to provide guidance.
- Biannual beginner workshops (fall and spring) ensure hands-on experience.
- Club auctions are a great way to find affordable material.
- Your yearbook includes repotting timelines, calendars, and valuable information — read it cover to cover!

Final Thought:

“Bonsai is not a race, nor a destination. Bonsai is a never-ending journey.”

— Jenna Williams, Educational Director
Phoenix Bonsai Society