

# *Adventures in Gardening*

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## **Bonsai**

*How to grow miniature trees*



*There are a few steps to successfully caring for bonsai trees.*

The first decision you need to make is rather you want an indoor bonsai or an outdoor bonsai. I have only outdoor bonsai trees but that means I need a place for them to spend the winter. That place is my little greenhouse. They need to go dormant and experience cold temperatures but they need protection from the very cold winter days. Mine are buried in soil, pot and all, all winter. In the Spring I dig them out and place them on this table with a white tablecloth to reflect excess heat. They are in partial shade. It is important that they not be allowed to dry out. To prevent this I place moss in each pot and when the moss becomes too brown I know it is time to water the trees.

Two of these bonsai trees were purchased: the Ginkgo Biloba and the Juniper. The others were gathered from saplings I found around my yard. I have a Chinese Elm, a Maple, a Linden, some kind of evergreen, and a couple I'm not sure about (maybe a Crab Apple and a Smoke Bush). These trees should live longer than I will and they become more precious each year. My oldest and first bonsai is the Juniper. It is about 20 years old now. The youngest is about two years old. I would have more but I've run out of places to keep them so now I concentrate on caring for the ones I have.

If you go the route of an indoor bonsai then you are limited to trees that do not need a cold period such as the very popular Jade. All bonsai trees need attention to keep them healthy.

There are two main activities when caring for bonsai trees: trimming the branches and trimming the roots. Bonsai trees are grown in a very rocky soil to allow lots of air around the roots so they won't rot. Over time the rocks break down and soil forms naturally. The roots become too

crowded and something needs to be done to return air to the environment. This bonsai has just

been removed from its pot and is ready to be washed and trimmed. First the root ball is gently rinsed over a sieve. I won't lie, this is a messy process. It is a good idea to work outside.



Here you can observe the results of putting the soil around the bonsai through a sieve. The rocky material will be returned to the pot. The sludge will be dumped into the garden. The roots are trimmed before the bonsai is returned to the pot. The



pot is cleaned and a little bit of bonsai fertilizer is added. After putting the bonsai through this kind of stress, it is important to keep it moist for the next few days while the plant heals. I trim the roots of my bonsai trees about once every two years.



The other major component of bonsai care is trimming the branches. Here are before and after photos of this process. Trimming is a creative process and there isn't a wrong or right. You aim for something that is pleasing to view. I usually think my freshly trimmed bonsai is a bit ugly. It



also needs time to heal from the stress of cutting branches. I do NOT do both root trimming and branch trimming at the same time. I trim about once every two years unless the plant is growing extra long branches, then I trim those branches that stick out and look like they don't belong. For the Juniper, my intent is to separate the branches and to create rounded shapes on each branch.





For my Chinese Elm, my goal is to shorten the branches and maximize branching to create a full plant.

There are many resources to teach us about bonsai trees but most of my learning has been by doing (and sometimes failing) and then doing again. I've lost a few maple trees because they were scorched in the sun. That's when I discovered the moss.

I enjoy my little trees. When I look at them, I can imagine a forest. They provide me with a different perspective of a tree, a view of tree roots, an awareness of how the tree changes as it grows. If you are interested in bonsai trees, I recommend a visit to the Botanical Gardens. They have some amazing trees that I love to visit. I can only hope my young trees will reach such a level of austerity.