

# The Art of Bonsai

By Eugene Howell

Just as in any other art form, when we take up the art of bonsai we want to do as well as we possibly can. We want to create something beautiful; something for which we can have personal pride.

To be successful in most art forms one must learn the physical techniques of producing the art object, i.e., how to load a brush, composition, how a stone reacts to the chisel, spatial relationships, color value, anatomy, etc. There usually does not need to be an extensive knowledge of how the paints were manufactured, or the geological activities that caused a particular type of stone to be naturally formed, or the molecular chain that causes a metal to be a metal. In the art of bonsai, however, we are dealing with a living object that can grow, languish, or die, depending upon our knowledge of such subjects as botany, plant diseases, plant pests, plant nutrition, and micro-biology, among others. We have to know what a plant does in order to grow, how it does it, what happens when it does not do it correctly or completely, what can harm a plant, how to stop or avoid the things that harm the plant, how to keep it at peak performance, how to avoid killing it through our own actions, and many more pieces of information.

It is true that one can pursue the art of bonsai for several years without learning much about these subjects and have perfectly healthy plants. But when one does this he/she is betting on luck and luck can be with you only for so long before it abandons you and everything falls apart. When your luck does finally change, you will be totally in the dark as to what needs to be done to save the tree. It is very disheartening to have a tree die that you have put years of effort into.

Some people will argue that they can always rely on some of the more knowledgeable people in the club to bail them out of problems with their trees. Yet here again the person is relying on luck to be with them because one never truly knows the extent of knowledge of the person giving the assistance. Many people are perfectly willing to give advice, even lousy advice, as long as the effect of the poor/bad advice is of no harm to one of their own plants.

The amount of expertise that is required in order to be reasonably knowledgeable in the art of bonsai is fairly broad, so, short of going back to college, where and how does one get the necessary knowledge?

If you truly want to expand your knowledge of the art, it is amazing what can be accomplished in a half hour of reading each evening. In most cases we are not so busy that we cannot find 30 minutes to do this. The real question is whether there is sufficient interest to do it. If you really want to do the best you can in bonsai, then you will make the time.

Surprisingly, there are not that many books that one needs to own in order to be able to cope with almost all of the events that can occur in the life of a bonsai. No one needs to know everything in each of them, but if you spend enough time becoming sufficiently familiar with each that you know what they cover, then you can always do the detailed reading when a situation arises.

I have been interested in gardening/horticulture/bonsai for all of my adult life so I have a collection of books that is quite extensive, but among all those books, the ones listed below are those that I go to most frequently to answer a question; I whole-heartedly recommend that every bonsai enthusiast have them in his/her library. These can usually be obtained from Amazon.com or Alibris.com. Alibris.com specializes in rare and out-of-print books so give it a try if you can't find the book elsewhere. It once found a bonsai book for me in a small book shop in Bombay, India.

Botany for Gardeners by Brian Capon

Pests and Diseases from the American Horticultural Society

The Complete Encyclopedia of Trees and Shrubs, Ernie Wasson (Chief Consultant)

Tropical and Subtropical Trees: An Encyclopedia by Margaret Barwick

Garden Insects of North America by Whitney Cranshaw

And finally; any one of the many excellent books on bonsai.