

# The Art of Bonsai

By Eugene Howell

Like any other art form, we can get caught up in the mystique of the art and lose sight of the fact that we are, after all, talking about a living plant in a pot. While having a beautifully developed bonsai is the artistic goal of the art form, it sure helps if the bonsai is still alive when it reaches that point.

As with all plants, whether in a pot, in the ground, or in the house, there are four fundamental environmental-factors which determine whether a plant is robust and grows in a healthy manner, or whether it dies. These are light, temperature, water, and soil. When one or another of these goes out of whack the tree can begin to suffer and show symptoms of ill health. If not corrected, the tree can languish or die, so it pays to thoroughly understand the role that each of these play in the health of your tree and to keep them within the acceptable bounds for that particular species.

There are two more factors that can play pivotal roles also, but these are considered secondary to the four fundamental ones mentioned above. These are pests and disease.

Over the coming months I will discuss each of these. If, in doing so, I leave you confused about anything, please send me an email and I will do everything I can to clear up the confusion.

First let's take a look at temperature.

Every plant has a temperature zone within which it is genetically programmed to grow well. The North American continent is divided into 11 hardiness zones, with the coldest being the ones with the low numbers and the warmest being those with the higher numbers. Zone 3 is the coldest within the lower 48 states. This takes in parts of Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Zones 9 thru 11 are the warmest and cover the majority of the Florida peninsula. In Brevard County we are in Zone 9, with the southern part of the county and the beaches being in Zone 9b and the upper, western part of the county being in Zone 9a.

If you attempt to grow a plant that is not genetically programmed for our hardiness zone it may survive (depending on how you pamper it) but it may not flourish. This particularly holds true for plants that normally grow in cooler zones than ours. Some of these are Maples and several types of Juniper, among others.

Tropicals (plants that normally grow in Zones 11 and 12) will do very well in our zone if given adequate cool weather protection. Many of these tropicals will tolerate temperatures down into the 50's but begin to suffer when exposed to the 40's. They usually will die if exposed to temperatures in the 30's for only a few hours. Some of these are Bouganvillea glabra, Myrciaria cauliflora (Jaboticaba), Neea buxifolia, Ficus (var.), Carmona microphylla (Fukien tea), and Conocarpus erectus (Buttonwood).

Know the temperature requirements of your trees. There really is no excuse for having a tree seriously damaged or killed because you never researched its temperature needs.