BONSAI TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

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Author (left) with Peter Chan, the world famous Bonsai Artist (Herson Bonsai Ltd., U. K.)

Author (centre) with Bonsai Instructors Haruo Nakamura (left) and Susumu Nakamura, Vice-chairman and Director respectively of Nippon Bonsai Association, Japan
BONSAI TIPS FOR BEGINNERS
(FOR INDIAN CLIMATE)
A STEP BY STEP GUIDE FOR MAKING BONSAI

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

I have tried, as far as possible, to give details of my experience in this book. I have acquired this experience after many years of Bonsai Cultivation. I hope that beginners will find this book useful.

There are still many topics left to tell about this art, which I could not mention here, as this book is purely written for beginners.

Naresh Agarwal

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I acknowledge the inspiration and help extended to me by my wife Namita, for writing this book.
INTRODUCTION

Bonsai is not merely an ordinary plant, grown in a shallow pot or tray. It is a miniature tree which resembles in character to its counterpart grown up tree in nature. Like any big tree, it should have following characters to be called a Bonsai.

(a) Good surface roots spread over the soil.
(b) Gradual tapering trunk from base to top of the trunk.
(c) An apex
(d) Triangular branch arrangement.
(e) Artistic natural look.

Many people think that in Bonsai, age is the most vital aspect, but that is not correct. A very old Bonsai will never be appreciated if its shape or look is not attractive, whereas a lesser old Bonsai will be appreciated more if its shape and branch arrangement are good. So, never run after the age of
Bonsai but concentrate on its basic structure of trunk, branches, roots, etc.

In our tropical country, plants grow so fast that we don’t have to wait for many years for making Bonsai. A Plant can be trained or designed for a good Bonsai even within three to four years. In cold countries, the same result will come out in twice the time due to slow growth of plants.

Many people are confused that Bonsai is made out of some special types of plants, which will not grow more than one to two feet. But this is not true. Plants used in making Bonsai are very ordinary and due to their regular pruning and cutting of roots and branches they do not grow very high.

For making Bonsai, we select the plants which are very hardy in our climate and grow rapidly with good health. These hardy plants will resist shock of cutting their roots and branches without any problem.
Sources of Plants For Bonsai

(a) Collecting from wild
(b) From nursery stock
(c) By propagation from various methods of seed germination, cutting, air layering, grafting etc.

Tools For Bonsai

Any tool, which is used for gardening can be used for Bonsai purpose. However, there are some specialized tools meant for Bonsai, which are very costly and rather suitable for advanced growers.

Various Tools used for Making Bonsai are:
(a) Trimming shears or any scissors
(b) Secretiour
(c) Concave branch cutter
(d) Wire cutter
(e) Pliers
(f) Root rake for removing soil from plants
(g) Brush
(h) Clamp for bending heavy trunk and branches
(i) Poking stick

In the beginning, you can start with one each of secretiour, scissors, wire cutter. Keep habit of regular sharpening of tools and applying light coat of any machine oil for prevention of rust.
Bonsai Soil

A right preparation of soil will always keep Bonsai healthy. If soil preparation is not good, the plant will not grow healthy roots will start rotting, leaves will fall and ultimately the plant will die.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD BONSAI SOIL

(a) Enough porosity to hold the air for roots.
(b) Ability to hold moisture for one day, but not for many days
(c) Ability to keep nutrients for plants for long time.
(d) Good drainage so that excess water will come out at the time of watering the Bonsai
SOIL PREPARATION - METHOD 1

1. Ordinary Garden soil available in garden, forest, etc.
   Qty- 3 Parts by Volume
2. Cow dung manure
   Qty- 3 Parts by Volume
3. Brick Pieces of size 2 mm to 4 mm thickness
   Qty- 2 Parts by Volume

SOIL PREPARATION - METHOD 2

1. Ordinary Garden soil available in garden, forest, etc.
   Qty- 3 Parts by Volume
2. Cow dung manure
   Qty- 3 Parts by Volume
3. Thick River Sand
   Qty- 3 Parts by Volume

SOIL PREPARATION - METHOD 3

1. Ordinary Garden soil available in garden, forest, etc.
   Qty- 3 Parts by Volume
2. Leaf mold
Qty- 3 Parts by Volume
3. River Sand
Qty- 3 Parts by Volume

**SOIL PREPARATION - METHOD 4**

1. Ordinary Garden soil available in garden, forest, etc.
   Qty- 3 Parts by Volume
2. Leaf mold
   Qty- 3 Parts by Volume
3. Brick Pieces of size 2 mm to 4 mm thickness
   Qty- 2 Parts by Volume

**PREPARATION OF GARDEN SOIL**

It is always better to dig soil near the roots of any established tree. This soil contains more humus, which is good for plants. Before using soil, make it completely dry and then crush all the particles which are larger than 5 mm. After crushing sift the soil through a fine mesh so that complete dust will come out separately. Throw away these dusts
completely as these are very harmful for plants due to their tendency to block air circulation and cause water logging. Soil particles between 1 and 5 mm are most suitable for Bonsai.

**COW DUNG MANURE PREPARATION**

Store cow dung in any pit for three months to one year and use it in complete dry condition after crushing big particles. There is no need of screening this manure.

**BRICK PIECES PREPARATION**

Prepare small pieces of bricks in two sizes: one 6 mm to 10 mm thick and other 2 mm to 5 mm thick. Screen out all the dust acquired at the time of crushing.

Big particles will be used in lower portion of the pot as a drainage layer and small particles will be used in basic soil preparation.
For Bonsai we generally use shallow containers made of ceramic or clay. Pots made of cement, plastic and wood are also popular now a days. Containers are of various shapes like oval, square, rectangular, round, hexagonal, etc. Every pot should have at least 3/4 hole in its bottom portion. So that excess water can drain out. Selection of pots depend upon the sizes of plants, colour of fruits, colour of leaves etc. Usually, pot length should be choosen as per the height of potential Bonsai. Generally two thirds of plants
height is most suitable size of pot and height of pot can be as per the thickness of trunk of a plant. Suppose the selected plant height is 18”, then its two thirds i.e. 12” will be pot length and if plant trunk is 1” thick, then height of pot will be 2”.

POTTING METHOD

1. Cover the drainage hole of the selected pot by the help of any plastic or steel wire mesh to prevent soil from draining out.
2. Cover bottom of pot with thin layer of brick pieces of sizes 6 mm to 10 mm as explained earlier. Put some river sand on the brick pieces to cover the gaps between the brick pieces.

3. Now put some prepared soil on these brick pieces.

4. Remove the plant from nursery container and with the help of root-rake or chop-stick remove 2/3rd portion of soil from the plant.

5. Choose front position of the plant. Front position means the side of the plant which looks most beautiful and people will see the plant from that side.

6. Cut any tap thick or encircling roots of the plant.
7. Now put the plant into the pot. If the pot is round or square, place it in the centre. If it is rectangular or oval, place the plant off the centre towards the rear on any side, left or right.

8. Fill the container with the prepared soil.

9. If the plant requires some support, tie a wire from outside the pot anchoring the trunk of the plant.

10. Poke the soil with chop-stick to remove air pockets.

11. Trim the longer branches of the plant to give the whole tree an triangular shape.

12. Water the Bonsai by a fine nose shower.
13. Keep this Bonsai in semi shade for 10 days and after this period bring it to fill sunlight.

**BONSAI STYLES**

There are five basic styles of Bonsai in which any plant can be trained. These styles are made as per the various shapes of trees found in nature.
A. **Formal Upright Style:**

This style of Bonsai has a straight erect trunk from base to apex. Pine trees are real examples of this style.

B. **Informal Upright Style:**

This style has a curved trunk like ‘S’ shape of English letter. Mostly 70% Bonsai are trained in this style.
C. **Slanting Style:**

This style has curved trunk slanting left or right with apex. In nature this happens due to heavy wind.

D. **Semi-Cascade Style:**

This style has a trunk which grows up and tip of lowest branch cascade between rim and feet of container. For this style we don’t use shallow pots, but use deep containers.
E. **Cascade Style:**

This style has a trunk which bends down and tip of cascade branch grows below the feet of the container. In this style also we use deep pots only.

**VARIOUS OTHER STYLES OF BONSAI**
A. **Root over Rock Style**: In this style the root of Bonsai grows over rock and survives with the help of soil kept below the rock. In any hilly area you will find hundreds of examples of this style.

B. **Broom Style**: In this style the trunk of Bonsai must be short or of low height and branches are trained in such a fashion that it will look like an upside-down broom.
C. **Umbrella Style:** Generally most of the trees of tropical climates take this shape. In this style, Bonsai is trained to from an umbrella like shape.

D. **Forest style:** Many trees are planted in a tray to look like a forest in this style. Bigger trees are placed in the front side and smaller trees in the back side of tray.
E. **Bunjin Style:** These Bonsai plants are trained as per Chinese paintings of trees.

F. **Mame Bonsai:** These are very small Bonsai of less than 6 to 7 inches height but with complete character of a grown up tree.
TRAINING OF BONSAI

The following are some tips to help train Bonsai in various shapes:

1. Bottom 1/3rd part of plant should not have any branches.

2. Middle 1/3rd part of plant should have bigger branches and top 1/3rd should have smaller branches than middle portion. So shape of the plant become triangularish.

3. Every Bonsai should have one apex.
4. Overall form of Bonsai must be triangular so that sunlight can reach each and every part of the plant. The parts which get less sunlight will grow weaker and after some time it will die.

5. The lowest branches of a Bonsai must be the heaviest.

6. Avoid branches coming directly towards the front.

7. Always cut growing branches leaving two sets of leaves for compact growth of plants.

8. Expose roots of plants on the surface of soil in radial direction.

9. Every Bonsai must have one front and one back. Front of Bonsai is the side from which the plant looks most beautiful. Back branches are required for depth of a Bonsai.

10. Allow branches to grow only in a horizontal direction.
11. Trim branches which cross one another.
12. Trim parallel growing branches.

**WIRING**

Wiring is used for training the branches and trunk of Bonsai to a desired shape. A wired branch or trunk will take the desired shape just by bending in any direction.

Two types of wire are used—copper or aluminium. These wires are reusable. The wire thickness vary as per the thickness of branch or trunk desired to be given shape. While wiring branches, keep wire at 45° angle to branch for best
results. Wire should be removed after a few months when it starts penetrating into the bark of plants.

**REPOTTING**

Repotting is the process in which half of the roots of Bonsai is trimmed and the plant is potted in fresh soil. By this process the plant gets fresh soil full of nutrients and produce new fibrous roots which maintains the good health of the plant.

A new Bonsai requires repotting every year due to its rapid growth and for old Bonsai repotting should be done every 2/3 years.

**WHEN TO REPOT**

1. When pot is completely filled with roots and there is no place for more roots to develop.

2. When soil cannot hold the water as most of the soil is eaten by the plant.
C. Leaves start turning yellow in spite of regular care and watering.

D. Overall health of Bonsai looks Weak.

F. Rainy season is the most suitable time for repotting, although we can repot Bonsai in any season except winter.

FERTILIZERS

Since Bonsai is growing in a small container, only small amount of nutrients is available to it. So, regular application of fertilizers is necessary for maintaining its good health. Fertilizers are of two
types—‘organic’ and ‘Inorganic’. Organic are slow reaching and inorganic are fast reaching. But organic fertilizer is good for Bonsai due to its slow reacting character with soil. It also condition the soil.

In Japan, there is a practice to use organic fertilizers like oil seed cake (mustard seed cake) and bone meal mixed in 6:1 ratio and made into the shape of small ball with the help of water. They keep these small balls over the soil of Bonsai where they slowly react with the soil and penetrate deep at the time of watering.

Inorganic fertilizer-mixture can also can made in home by mixing Ammonium Sulphate, Potash and Super Phosphate in equal proportion by weight. This should be used after diluting in water. In 5 liter water two tea-spoonful of the above mixture is sufficient to give good result. It should be used once in every week period. Any newly potted plant should not be fertilized for at least one month.

Ready-made mixture named as ‘Sufla’ is also available.
By regular application of fertilizers plants get good quantity of nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium and other micro nutrients helping their growth. Flower and fruit bearing Bonsai requires more phosphorous than others. Nitrogenous fertilizers are required for vigorous growth of plants. Potassium helps in stiffening of branches, root-growth and also prevents plants from diseases.

**CARE & MAINTENANCE**

1. Protect the plant from heavy winds and strong sunlight during summer.
2. Keep Bonsai in neat and clean open area where it will get fresh air and full sunlight.
3. Bonsai is outdoor plant which can be brought inside for one or two days for decoration purpose. If it is kept inside for long period it may die.
4. In winter season don’t give any water to Bonsai until and unless the soil becomes completely
dry. But in summer season special care is required to water at least 2 times a day.

5. Regularly pinch or prune the new leaf buds of Bonsai to maintain overall shape and maintain the vigour or the plant.

6. Wash the leaves of Bonsai once a week.

**INSECT AND FUNGUS CONTROL**

Like other plants, Bonsai also gets affected by various types of insects and fungi. For the control of insects any suitable type of insecticide like rogor can be sprayed on the plant. It is a wide spectrum insecticide and is very suitable for controlling vari
Various types of Insects. For the control of fungi use of Bavistein or Blitox is recommended. It is advisable to spray the plant with the above medicines at a regular interval of 30 days. There are some medicines also for controlling the insects of soil like Thimet 10G Feradin etc. Which go inside the system of plants and prevent it from the attack of insects.

Any insecticide or fungicide should be used with a precaution as they are very much harmful for human being.

**TYPES OF INSECT**

1. Sucking         2. Snail

**TYPES OF FUNGUS**

1. Black Spot       2. Rotting of branches or leaves.
SELECTION OF PLANTS FOR BONSAI

(a) Plants with small leaves and small fruits

(b) Plants which have vigorous growing habits

(c) Plants which give dense growth after every pinching and cutting

(d) Plants which are hardy to our climatic conditions

(e) Plants which easily produce flowers and fruits in small containers.
1. **Aralia**: Very showy and hardy plants
   Easily available at nurseries. Suitable for forest or umbrella style.

2. **Adenium-Obesum**: This is one of the most favourite plant of Bonsai plant of Bonsai growers. In one years is trunk grows upto 2” diameter. Its pink flowers are very showy which come in bunches. This plant should be pruned from the beginning to get more branches. Keep
it in shade in the rainy season as excess water is very harmful for this plant.

3. **Araucaria Execeisa- Christmas Tree**: A tree of cold climates needs semi shade conditions. Leaves of this plant are ornamental susceptible to burn in very hot days. It requires lot of water and good drainage. With regular pruning it can be made in dwarf form. It is good for forest or slanting style.

4. **Acharas Zapota-Chiku**: A fruit bearing plant which is generally produced by grafting process and bears fruit in a very short time. It is a very
hardy plant but there are some practical difficulties also in shaping this plant. It is only suitable for big Bonsai.

5. **Bougainvillea:** One of the most suitable flowering plants for Bonsai. It can easily be trained to various style. It grow very fast and without much care. Generally it gives flowers all around the year, but in winter flowers come in large quantity. Since the flowers come in the tip of the new branches, regular trimming of branches are essential to get a full bloom. Excess watering before flowering period may cause delay in flowering. So do not water it for 2 to 3 days which gives shock to the plant. After this shock flowers will
appear in full bloom. Generally single variety of Bougainvillea is good for Bonsai.

6. Bambusa: Many forms of dwarf bamboo are available like Golden Bamboo, Black Bamboo, Budha Belly Bamboo, Stick Bamboo etc. All of these are quite suitable for forest style only. These plants are hardy but require lot of water and a slightly shady location.

7. Calliandra-Powder Puff: Like its name its flowers look like powder puff. This plant bears red flowers all round the year
in large quantity. The trunk takes a long time to thicken and branches are also thick but it can be grown for its beautiful flowers.

8. **Cassis Biflora**: This plant has feathery leaves and branches grow vigorously from all places of the trunk. It is an ideal plant for Bonsai. During winter full bloom of yellow flowers come out which lasts for 10 to 15 days. It is very hardy plant.

9. **Casurina Equisetifolia**: We also call it the Australian Pine. This is a good substitute of the pine, quick growing very showy and hardy.
Good shapes can be produced in a year time. It requires more water compared to other plants. It is suitable for formal and informal upright styles.

10. **Carissa-Karaunda**: It is a fruit bearing plant. Fruits are like cherry which is used for making pickles. Fruits come out very easily in this plant and it lasts for at least two months. Its growth is vigorous and regular pruning is required to maintain its shape. It is suitable for informal upright and rock planting styles.

11. **Chinese Orange**: It is the most ornamental plant in Bonsai. Our climate is
ideal for it and in no time it will start bearing fruits in Bonsai. Even one hundred fruits can be obtained from one plant. The secrecy behind getting such large quantity of fruits is the application of bone meal and mustard cake at regular intervals of one month. It is suitable for umbrella, informal upright styles.

12. **Cycus revoluta**: This plant has palm like branches and the trunk is also different from other types of trees. It is suitable only for group planting styles.
13. **Duranta-Green, Variegated and Golden**: It produces white or light blue flowers, followed by small bunches of yellow berries which last for a long time. It is a vigorously growing plant, hence regular pruning is essential to maintain its shape. During summer protection from the afternoon sun is required. It is suitable for all styles of Bonsai.

14. **Ficus Varieties - Bar, Peepal, Gular, Benjamina, etc**: These are very large trees which develop a
heavy trunk very fast and are most suitable for all styles, but specially for rock planting style.

15. **Hibiscus**: There are over one hundred varieties of this plant with different coloured flowers, but you can choose the variety with small flowers and small leaves.

16. **Ixora**: This is a very common landscape plant which has very long flowering period. It bears pink, yellow, orange and red flowers which last a long time. Although
its trunk takes a lot of time in thickening. It can be shaped in most of the styles.

17. **Junipers:** There are many varieties of Junipers but for hot climates, Juniper Prostrata suits most due to its compact growing habits. For maintaining its shape, regular pinching of leaves is necessary. Cascade style is its natural style but it can be trained in informal upright or root over rock style also. Some care is required during the summer season.

18. **Averoha Karambola-Kamarak:** This is a fruit bearing plant which gives fruit mostly during winter. Fruits come easily in the grafted plants within one year. Its white
pinkish flowers in bunches are also very attractive although this plant does not acquire good shape. But because of its attractive fruits, it can be trained as a Bonsai.

19. **Lagerstroemia Indica**: This plant has a very showy brown bark and mauve, white and rose coloured flowers. In winter, all the leaves drop off which again come in spring. This plant is suitable for informal upright rock planting styles.

20. **Lanatna**: There are many varieties of this species but only some are suitable for Bonsai. This is a fast growing and flowering plant. Plenty of water is
required for the growth of this plant. Yellow flowering lantana is most popular in Bonsai.

21. **Malpighia Coccigera-Howthorn:**

These are small plants which do not grow more than one metre tall. The leaves are most beautiful parts of this plant which are very small and shiny. White flowers cover all the branches during the flowering season. For getting the compact growth of this plant regular pruning of branches is required. It is most suitable for Saikei or forest styles.
22. **Pine:** These plants are suitable for cold climatic conditions. They also survive in tropical climates. The light green leaves are needle shaped which turn to brown before they fall off. Grow these plants in semishade conditions and regularly pinch the leaves off for the compact growth the major problem with these plants are they die during repotting. Try to repot these plants in winter only, once in 3/4 years.

23. **Pithocolobium Dulce-Benth-Jungle Jalebi:** It is a very fast growing variety which gives curious 4 to 5
Bonsai Tips For Beginners

19. **Bonsai-** Fruit which is \( \text{cm} \) long twisted spiral shaped-fruit which is eatable. This plant is also used for hedges due to its dense growth. It can be trained in informal upright or umbrella shape styles.

24. **Tamarind-Imli:** This is a hardy and fast growing plant which produce very attractive bark on its trunk within a very short time. New leaves are very attractive. It requires mush lesser care than other plants. Umbrella style is ideal for this plant.
25. **Jade:** This is one of the most suitable plant for Bonsai in our tropical climate. It likes less water and full sun. Regular pruning is necessary to maintain its shape initially its trunk is flexible but after some time. It becomes very stiff. It is suitable for all the styles but good for making root over rock style.

26. **Pomegranate:** There are two varieties of pomegranates-dwarf variety (Puncia granatum 'Nana') and the normal variety. Dwarf variety bears one inch round fruits in very young plants. It never grows to
more than 3/4 metres in height. The normal variety is also suitable for Bonsai. Some care is required at the time of watering as excess water harms this plant.

27. **Adansoia Digitata-Baobab:**

This is the biggest girth tree of the world which grows to a bottle like shape. It is very hardy and very little care is required in maintaining it. Roots are twisting type and attractive.

28. **Malpighia Glabra-Barbados Cherry:** It bears red edible cherry in tropical climate. It is a hardy plant
and can be trained in different Bonsai styles very easily.

29. **Mulberry**: It bears fruit very easily in our climate conditions. Bonsai gets fully covered with its fruits. It is very fast growing hardy plant, consuming lot of water. Regular spray of Roger will prevent it from various insects.

30. **Murraya Exotica**: It is a most suitable plant for Bonsai which gives white scented flowers in summer and rainy season. Flowers are followed by orange berries. It produces branches all over its trunk and can be trained in all styles of Bonsai.
Introduction

Dr Naresh Agrawal is a self made entrepreneur, who was born in Steel City of Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, India on 1st September 1960. He has been regularly writing poetry, inspirational thoughts & quotes, even after being fully engaged in business. Some of his best Hindi poems have been published in all major magazines of India.

He is an author of 6 books on poetry and another 6 books on education, and life philosophy. Most recently (in 2014) he published his book, “Sukti Sagar” - containing 1000 motivational quotes in Hindi.

He is also the Chief Editor of Famous Rajasthani cum Hindi Magazine "Marudhar". Which has a huge reach and is widely circulated in several states including Jharkhand the most.

Besides writing, Naresh is a complete expert in the art of BONSAI. In 1996 he wrote “Bonsai Tips for Beginners” to help people learn this art.

He is also an extensive traveller & an avid photographer. Some of his other interests include Astrology, palmistry, homeopathy etc.

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AUTHOR NARESH AGARWAL WITH HIS 40 YEAR OLD BANYAN BONSAI DURING A FLOWER SHOW