

SPECIAL TECHNIQUES **Bonsai, Topiary, Standards and Braiding**

BONSAI

Bonsai is a centuries-old practice of growing trees and shrubs in shallow containers, and maintaining them in a miniature or dwarfed condition. The term literally means “a plant in a tray”, and combines both horticultural and artistic practices. Bonsai is actually credited to the Chinese, and was introduced into Japan about a thousand years ago. It was the Japanese who refined it and became the bonsai masters. Bonsai did not become well known in the western hemisphere until the beginning of the early 1900's, and since the 1970's this form of growing plants has been very popular world-wide.

General Characteristics

The main objective of bonsai is to convey the appearance of an “older” plant, even on young specimens, which is achieved by:

- Thick stems, giving the illusion of a mature wood typical of the same plant grown in the wild.
- Foliage that is loose or absent near the attachments of the branches to the main stem -- and denser at branch endings.
- Thick roots, which protrude slightly from the soil or medium.
- A complete absence of any marks from the training wires.

Plants for bonsai culture

- **Deciduous** temperate-zone trees such as *maples, *hornbeams, and *elms
- **Evergreens** such as *boxwoods, *pines, and *junipers.
- **Tropical species** such as *Weeping fig, *Australian Umbrella Tree, *Jade plant, *Ming Aralia

Sources of plants

- Dug from the wild
- From nurseries
- From seedling or rooted cutting

Pruning and training

- Root pruning
- Branch and foliage pruning
- Wire Training

General Cultural Requirements

*Media

*Temperature

- Deciduous types
- Tropical types

*Light

- Natural
- Artificial

*Humidity

*Watering

- Temperate types
- Tropical types

*Fertilization

TOPIARY

Topiary is the practice of pruning and training plants into shapes such as *geometric forms, *letters of the alphabet, *figures such as animals, etc. A shape is acquired by selectively cutting off branches which are growing in the wrong direction, and pinching stem tips. It has its origins in the early Roman times and historically has been practiced on outdoor plants with dense growth (*Example: VT symbol as one enters the University driving through Southgate Road from the 460 Bypass*).

Indoor plant topiary can be done with success by the novice. The easiest method is to buy or make a wire topiary frame such as an animal or Christmas tree. Cuttings such as *English Ivy or *Swedish Ivy (No Devil's Ivy) can be propagated and used for the frame.

Prepare or purchase medium and pack it into the wire shell. Poke a hole into the medium with a pencil or finger and insert the cuttings. After inserting the cuttings, each can be woven thoroughly throughout the frame and pinched, which will promote lateral branching. As they branch, weave them further until the surface of the frame is covered. From then on, clip off growth that strays out of the plane of the figure.

STANDARDS AND BRAIDING

A **standard** is essentially a plant that stands upright with a single, bare trunk or trunklike stem. They tend to have a neat appearance that draws attention to the trunk and cluster of foliage in a rather formal and elegant manner. Standards are suitable for both woody and non-woody species such as *Geranium, *Scented Geranium, *Coleus, *Ming Aralia and *Weeping Fig.

To create a standard, start with a young plant that has a strong central stem and continually prune or strip all branches and leaves as the plant develops. Lateral stems can be pinched or clipped-off as necessary to promote a full, dense cluster of foliage atop the bare trunk. Non-woody standards must be supported by stakes, whereas woodier plants are able to be free-standing when they mature.

Braiding is a modification of a standard in which multiple stems of a plant are **braided like hair**, which overtime eventually fuse to form a trunk with a decorative, gnarled appearance. Stems that break from the sides of the trunks should be pinched off, but the terminal growing points should not be pinched to allow vertical growth to continue. Braiding and pinching should continue as the plant grows until the desired height of the trunk is attained.