

Growing Bonsai Indoors

By Bob

How do they feel about being inside?

One of the most common misconceptions about bonsai is that they should be grown indoors. With the exception of tropicals and sub tropicals, all bonsai should be grown outdoors. Temperate climate woody plants must go through a period of cold dormancy in order to survive. This dormancy completes a yearly cycle. In deciduous trees this is a very obvious phenomenon, however, temperate evergreens such as juniper also need to go through this cycle.

Tropicals and similar "houseplants" can be successfully trained for bonsai and grown indoors year round. In mild climates, temperate bonsai should remain outdoors year round. In cold climates, temperate climate plants should be grown outdoors during the warm seasons of the year, but will need winter protection.

The Need for Strong Light

The major problems in indoor growing are the lack of intense light. Even if you kept your bonsai in an unobstructed south facing window, I doubt that the light would be sufficient for many species of woody plants. Most people just don't understand how dark it is in the house, even in front of a window.

Consider that, outside, the light comes from not only the direct sun, but from 180 degrees of sky plus all the reflected light of objects in the other 180 degrees.

Light from a window is little better than a point source of light. You can correct this by putting your bonsai in the sunniest window of your house, but not too close to the glass or it will experience excessive heat buildup. This light may be too intense for some tropicals that are used to growing on the forest floor, but for most woody temperate climate plants it is still insufficient. Couple this with an overhead fluorescent lamp for these species. Keep the lamp about six inches above the plant. Twin forty watt fixtures are inexpensive to purchase and use. Special bulbs are not necessary, I personally use a mixture of cool white and warm white in my indoor fluorescent light fixture for indoor bonsai growing. Keep the lamp on 12 hours a day to augment the sunlight. If you lack a window with sufficient light for even low light tropicals, you can safely use fluorescent lamps as the only source of light.

Watering

Virtually no one with experience in bonsai recommends watering by immersion, or watering to a schedule. Watering by immersion occasionally is fine, for instance if the plant is extremely dry and needs immediate resuscitation, or if it has just been repotted, or if you want to soak it in a fertilizer solution. Watering from overhead will help flush salts and waste gases from the soil. Outdoor watering in sunny summer weather is easy, the plants dry out every day, so you water them every day. Indoors is more difficult, you should only water when the plants needs water, not to a schedule.

Fertilizing

You can fertilize to a schedule, and that is probably the best way. Most water soluble fertilizers recommend that you fertilize full strength every other week. For indoor bonsai continue to fertilize as long as new growth is evident.

Air Circulation and Humidity

Air circulation in summer is easily provided by the outdoor air movement, in the winter you might want to get a small fan to provide air circulation. To create humidity place your plant on a bed of small stones in a large flat tray filled with water. Do not let the pot actually touch the water. The flatter the tray the better. This will help keep down the algae and other critters because nearly the entire volume of water will evaporate each day.

Insect and Disease Control

Insect and disease control will actually begin when you do all the above, because you will have an active healthy plant that will be able to resist them. Mites, aphids, woolly aphids, mealy bugs, scale and nearly all potential pests can be controlled if caught early and sprayed with an appropriate insecticidal soap. Repeat sprayings are necessary to get the new hatchlings. If you are getting leaf fungal diseases, decrease the humidity, stop misting, give the plant more light and air circulation.

Follow these tips and you should be able to grow suitable species indoors for bonsai. Start out with the easiest, Ficus, a really good tough plant for indoor growing.