

A Little Advice For Beginners

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If you are reading this we make the assumption that you are new to the world of bonsai. If so, there are a few things we would like to tell you and a little friendly advice we would like to pass along. First of all, the internet and the World Wide Web are changing bonsai just as they are affecting almost every other aspect of our lives. There are a lot of good, talented and well-meaning people involved in the art of bonsai whom you can now access through the web. The list keeps getting bigger every day.

Proceed With A Little Caution

There is also a lot of bad advice and a lot of people who are simply looking to get their hands on your wallet. As a novice to bonsai you need to proceed with a little caution and skepticism. Bonsai is a living art form which is immensely satisfying and exciting. It is also a little like trying to eat just one potato chip. Our involvement with bonsai began more than two decades ago. Our plan was to have one tree which we could sit next to the lasagna when guests came for dinner, so that they would know what refined and cultured individuals we were. Today, we operate a full time bonsai nursery and teaching center in Charlotte, North Carolina and spend at least 40 minutes each day just watering the bonsai. We're not complaining. We love it, and over the years the trees have given back much more than we have ever had to put out in terms of care. It is a great adventure and one which we hope you will choose to embark upon as well.

Learning To Paint Like Picasso

Remember that the people involved in bonsai are divided into two groups.... Art Collectors and Painters. You need to decide which group you are going to be a part of. If you decide to paint then begin slowly. Read as much as you can, take a class or two, get involved with your local club and above all... practice, practice, practice. It is the one single thing that beginners do not do enough of. It is not necessary for you to study Zen for 30 years in order to do bonsai, but there is a learning curve involved and you need to be ready to open your mind to new concepts. It is unreasonable for you to think that you will make a perfect bonsai on your first attempt or that you will never kill a tree. It's like expecting to paint like Picasso the first time you pick up a brush. You need the practical experience of trying and sometimes failing. We learn from our experiences more vividly than we can ever learn from a book, class or video. Mark Twain said that a man who picks up a cat by his tail will not make that mistake twice.

A Two Fold Responsibility

Unlike an artist who sculpts trees out of metal, we as bonsai artists have the responsibility of maintaining the plant's horticultural health after our styling session is complete. You, as a newcomer to bonsai, need to not only learn how to make your newly-acquired bush look like a little tree... you also need to know how to keep it alive and healthy. This is information which is vital to you if you ever hope to succeed in the art of bonsai. Although there is much to learn, do not despair. Even the longest journey



begins with a single step. Consider the fact that the horticultural expertise required to keep a five dollar juniper alive is exactly the same as that required to keep a five thousand dollar juniper alive. It therefore behooves you to start with fairly inexpensive plant material until you get comfortable with what you are doing.

Consider also that truly great bonsai come from great material. In time you will want to acquire better material, but for now, focus on relatively inexpensive plants until you become more comfortable with what you are doing. The great American bonsai teacher, John Naka has said that we need to learn to listen to our trees and then do what they tell us. The trees can talk and they have volumes to say. Your task at this point in your education is to listen and learn to "speak tree." Once you can hear what your plants are saying, it will be a small matter to do what they tell you.

RememberPractice, Practice, Practice

We at the Bonsai Learning Center stand ready to assist you. We carry a full line of bonsai supplies and related books and magazines and we offer an ever-expanding variety of classes, workshops and seminars to help in the educational process, but in the last analysis, the proverbial ball is in your court. Remember what we said before. Even if you never read a book or took a course, the three most important things you have to do are: practice, practice and practice. Remember also that we are here to help you. We don't mind "dumb" questions. If you get in trouble, call us. We cannot resurrect the dead, but if you call us in time, perhaps we can help.