

Why is My bonsai dying?

By Randy Clark Charlotte, NC

The expression "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," applies here. It's not difficult to grow a bonsai, but it requires that you understand some of the fundamentals. It's like buying a tank full of tropical fish. You need to understand how to take care of them or you will have dead fish very shortly. If your tree is dieing,(and/or is dead... deceased... passed away... kaput... or no longer among the living, then a number of possibilities present themselves as to how it may arrived at that condition:

Possibility #1

You have made the gods of bonsai angry!

SOLUTION: Try burying a dead squirrel under the front porch of your house during the dark of the moon. This usually pleases the gods of bonsai. If this does not work. Get another hobby... Sorry about that! Just kidding.

Possibility #2

Your bonsai was dead when you bought it.

Consider where your bonsai came from. Did you buy it from a reputable bonsai dealer or did you buy it from a strange looking man selling them off the back of a pick up truck in a gas station parking lot? No? How about off the shelf at Sam's Club where it had been sitting on a rack stacked ten deep, in the dark for the last six weeks. No? How about from Home Depot or some other lumber yard? All of the rest of the wood in those places is dead... why not your bonsai tree.

SOLUTION A: Go back and see if the man in the gas station parking lot is still there.

SOLUTION B: In the future, make sure that you buy your bonsai from a reputable dealer who will still be in the same location when you come back with problems. Most garden centers don't know a lot about bonsai, but they can usually direct you to someone who can help provide accurate information on care. Don't kid yourself into believing that the clerk at Wal-mart; Target; Sam's Club; or Home Depot will ever be able to provide you with anything useful in the way of bonsai information.

Possibility #3

You are killing your tree with kindness.

Most people are so afraid they are going to do something to hurt their little tree, that they usually kill them with kindness. Most of the time people are so terrified that they will let the tree dry out tht they wind up drowning them.

That's one possibility, but don't dismay, there are many and varied ways you can do your little tree in.

Most bonsai offered for sale in America are "production" plants generated by the tens of thousands to fill a consumer demand in the marketplace. The vast majority are created from junipers or are tropical varieties which would fall under the classification of "houseplant" if they were sitting anywhere else in the store except the bonsai section. They were created by whacking off half the root system, jamming it into a bonsai pot and covering the whole thing with spray painted sphagnum moss or rocks which have been glued on so that they will remain in place while the plants are bounced around in the company's delivery vans. If this is what you have got, then we regret to report that your bonsai's survival prospects can probably be measured in days... if not hours. Let assume, however, that you managed to get the one healthy happy plant in the bunch. The question then becomes... how to keep it that way.

Regardless of what kind of horticultural material your bonsai was created from, it is a living plant and must,... like all living things,... be provided with sufficient quantities of food, light and water. A failure on your part to provide any of these things (or to over provide them) and the result will be dead plant. Most of us know its not a good thing for plants to dry out.... so we logically reason that giving it water regularly can only help... right? Wrong! It can drown the tree. There is no recipe or set schedule for watering your bonsai. Giving it (for instance) half a cup of water every Thursday between 1 and 2 p.m., will almost surly result in disaster. Trees use water at different rates depending upon a wide range of factors.

SOLUTION: Common sense is your answer. The overall objective is to insure that the soil mass remains pleasantly moist, but not soggy. A soil mass which is constantly wet cannot provide enough oxygen to the root system and will develop root rot and die. Each tree will dry out at different rates depending upon factors such as the time of year, the kind of plant in question, whether is is in a sunny or shady location and how dry the air is. Your best guide to determining if your tree needs water is common sense. Stick you finger in the soil and make an educated guess. Trust your instincts Luke, and water... or don't water... depending upon what they tell you. Don't worry, the force will be with you.

People who wish to keep their bonsai in the house (In warm weather, they will do much better outside on the deck.) would also be well advised to mist the plants foliage frequently. Its very dry in the house. A plant will absorb as much water through its leaves and bark as it will through its root system. Also, especially in the wintertime, the air in the average home is much dryer than most plants prefer. Misting helps. Also sitting the tree on top of (but not directly in) a tray of water will help keep the humidity up.

Possibility #4

Your tree is infested with vermin!

SOLUTION: It could also be that your tree has gotten some sort of bug. A whole host of insects enjoy living indoors and will attack your bonsai if given the opportunity. Spider mites particularly love the dry air in our homes. Then there are always white flies, mealy bugs, scale, thrips and a whole host of other critters to look forward too. Check for bugs and if you find them... buy an insecticide and spray the tree. Almost any commercially available garden insecticide will do the trick. We use Schultz's houseplant and garden spray because its already mixed up, in a spray bottle and easy to use, but there are also lots of others to choose from. You will also find that taking your bonsai over to the sink and spraying the foliage with the dish spritzer will wash a lot of your bug problems down the drain. If this does not work, you might try burying another dead squirrel just for luck.

Possibility #5

Your tree is starving to death.

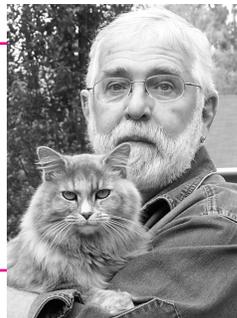
SOLUTION: Feed your bonsai every two weeks with the same fertilizers you would put on your other plants. Peters 20-20-20; Miracle Grow; Mir-acid; Schultz's... will all work fine. If you don't have easy access to a commercial fertilizer, try digging up the decomposing squirrel you buried under the front porch... grind him up and sprinkle him on the soil surface. (We hope you realize we're just kidding about the squirrel?)

Finally, keep the bonsai in a sunny window, and rotate it every few days, so the leaves don't wind up all growing to one side. Bonsai need a lot of light, which means it will not do well on your coffee table, desk top, book shelf or on top of the TV in the dark. In fact, the whole plant will do a lot better if you keep it outside on the deck during the warm months of the year. Tropical plants would need to be protected against cold temperatures of course.

Possibility #6

You haven't got the foggiest idea what you are doing!

SOLUTION: If you don't know whether you have a tropical or temperate tree then it wouldn't kill you to do a little reading on the subject. A bonsai is a work of art and not a particular variety of plant. If this is news to you then you need to do a little homework before attempting anything further. You don't have to study Zen for 30 years in order to do bonsai, but a little knowledge will shed a lot of light on the confusion you feel over growing bonsai. It's really not that hard, but you need a little basic information. You wouldn't buy a tank full of tropical fish without getting a book. The same thing applies to bonsai. Turn off the TV. Get dressed and head for Barnes and Noble or better yet, buy a book off of our web site. The gods of bonsai are not going to visit you in the night and bestow ultimate wisdom upon you. Its up to you! Get off your duff and go find out what you need to know to be successful. The information is plentiful and is all around you.



NOTE: This article and images it contains were written and photographed by Randy Clark, resident bonsai artist at the Bonsai Learning Center in Charlotte, NC. They are intended for private use only. Reproduction of this material for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited without the written consent of the author.