

## Care for your bonsai

- Repotted plants should be kept under a shade so that transpiration is minimum. After three weeks, expose the plants to sunlight.
- Once the plant is wired to stimulate its growth, keep it in the shade for two weeks.
- Since it is based in a shallow container, it should be watered twice a day. During dry spells, water would have to be sprinkled on the leaves.

- Insects hide under the leaves, so spray insecticide with a spray pump. Use a little bit of liquid detergent, as new leaves do not have the capacity to retain the insecticide. Detergent makes it sticky – so it will absorb the fertiliser and also repel insects.
- Once in two years change part of the soil, and cut the leaves every three to four months.

three different dimensions – right, left and back. It has to assume the shape of a proper triangle so that it absorbs sunlight properly. In fact, one must ensure that each branch and leaf gets equal sunlight for its healthy growth," discloses Sujay.

A bonsai has to be grown in special containers and should be kept outdoors. It is a popular myth that bonsai has to be kept indoors. "It is wrong and can lead to loss of the plant and waste of a lot of hard work due to lack of proper sunlight," he explains. According to him, bonsai grows faster in hot climates like those of India and UAE rather

**A bonsai of an orange tree bearing fruit. This is evidence enough that bonsai is not harmful to the natural growth of trees.**



than in colder ones like that of Japan.

The art of getting the perfect bonsai lies in pinching off new growth and tying the branches and trunks for the



**A 150-year-old Vitex, which is one of the most prized possessions of the Shahs. This tree was apparently plucked directly from the wild and made into a bonsai.**

desired shape and the stunted look. The soil required is alluvial – fertile and porous. Organic mass has to be mixed with the fertilisers for quick and healthy growth of the plants. Plenty of sunlight and watering them on alternate days are the essential requirements. Combined with proper care, it could ensure that a bonsai will live for a hundred years. "A bonsai is strong and difficult to destroy. In Japan it has become a tradition to pass a prized specimen from generation to generation," reveals Sujay.

The biggest criticism this art faces is that in wiring it one stops the natural growth of a plant – hence it is harmful to them. Sujay retorts that stunting trees does not mean curbing their normal development or preventing them from growing in abundance in an open space. "By cutting or clipping the buds we try to give the plant more growth, where multiple buds or sprouts appear. By pruning we also weed out the unwanted growth of the plant," he defends. "It is like training a plant to grow in the right manner. Like giving direction to our children, training them with the right kind of nourishment and guidance," adds Rupa. Sujay further underlines his argument by saying, "If the plant was not happy or healthy, would it flourish or bear fruit the way these bonsais do? I think this needs no explanation, as my plants are visual proof enough."

True enough, their terrace has an abundance of greenery which would make one forget the fact that it is the middle of the day, in the heart of one of India's most polluted cities. A collection of more than 1,500 trees (though potted) is like losing oneself in the midst of a lilliputian forest. ♣

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**Photographs: Dharmendra Mistry**



terrace garden of Sujay and Rupa Shah, who have dedicated their life to this 'finest form of horticulture', is a tree lover's paradise with over a thousand bonsai trees creating a bit of green serendipity in the heart of Bombay, a city that is choking in its own breath.

Sujay, who has considerable knowledge about the origins of this art, insists that bonsai is not new to India but dates back to the time of the Vedas when the *rishis* grew dwarfed trees, herbs and shrubs for medicinal and personal purposes. In Sanskrit it was called *Viman Tamu Vrushadi Vidya* - "the art of growing small trees." Travelling to China along with Buddhism over a thousand years ago, the art developed aesthetically with the use of exquisite bone-china pots and containers. It was introduced to Japan during the *Kamakura* period of cultural borrowing (inclusive of Zen Buddhism). This is where it was formally acknowledged as a science and rules were laid down for the developing of a bonsai. The Japanese, who completed the process of combining science and art and taking it to aesthetic heights, became synonymous with the art.

Sujay and Rupa have been developing bonsais over the last decade. Not only do they train people in this art, but they also have a mobile nursery called 'Ankur' to help take care

of the plants and a creche (!) to care for the plants of other people when they go out of town.

Sujay learnt the basics of bonsai growing while on a visit to the Far East, but over the years he has developed his own style. Since it is a very time-consuming process, he first developed a procedure and technique that made plants mature faster. There is a particular way he has adopted to cut and place the plants, which accelerates its growth. "Unlike other plants, one has to take special care of bonsai and it needs daily tending," says Sujay. "It is a way of breaking

down barriers which may arise due to linguistic or cultural divisions. In a modern stress-filled world, it is a very relaxing pastime that teaches people how to be patient," he adds.

A bonsai can be developed from seeds or a cutting from a young tree or, sometimes, even from naturally occurring stunted trees that can be transplanted into containers.

There are a number of techniques involved in the growing of bonsai. Rupa Shah, who doesn't regret sidelining her own interests for the sake of husband Sujay's hobby, enthusiastically explains, "The way to grow bonsai varies from person to person, but it requires a lot of hard work and devotion. The techniques involved are pruning, clipping and wiring. We have to tie the plant to give

it shape and definition. This is basically to balance it. Various styles can be adopted - like upright position, slanting, cascading, weeping cascade, literati or bunjugi (resembling a script), landscape, forest group, raft, root-over-rock and twisting trunk style. All these basically refer to the shape one wants the bonsai to take." Special copper-coated aluminum wires are the best for malleability and shaping of the trunks, as well as for grouping of the roots or cutting in the initial stages.

"Bonsai is a miniature version of a regular tree. We have to see that it grows in

*The Ficus nuda bonsai, in which the trunks of nine trees have been wired and developed as one.*



*In the foreground are bonsai of different styles. The bamboo trees resemble a tiny forest, while another pot shows the twisted trunk style.*