

Sunday, April 17, 2016

The Tribune

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Spectrum

GARDENING

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Honey, you can shrink your trees

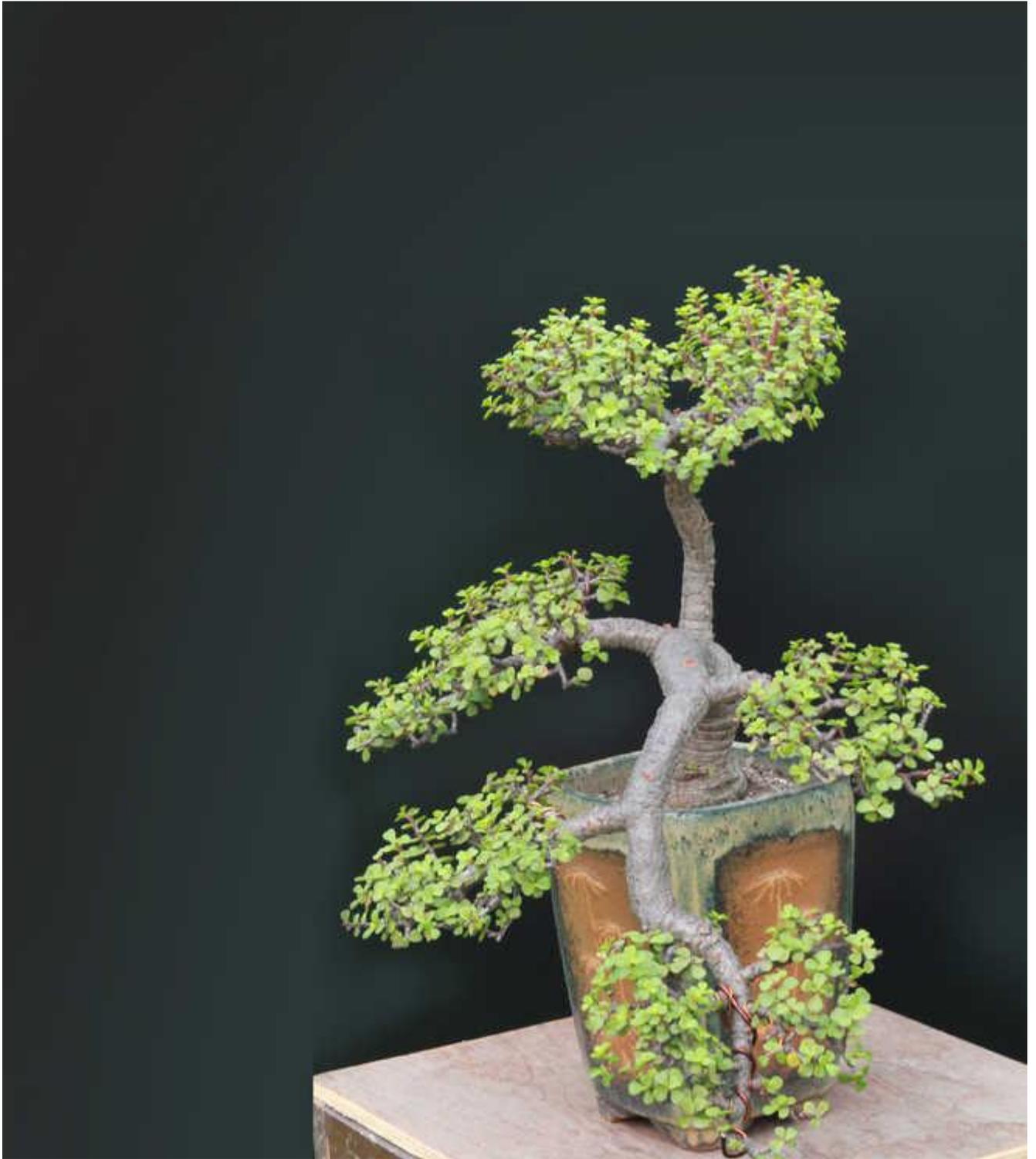
It is not easy to create little wonders that win you loads of wows. Bonsai gardening is a craft where love and hard work is put in over the years to create a piece of living art

The word bonsai means a small tree grown in a tray or in a pot where its growth is restricted by the technique of repeated pinching of foliage and pruning of leaves, branches and roots. While creating a bonsai, the development of the tree is not halted as is generally thought of, but is guided to get an aesthetically looking dwarf tree. Bonsai gardening is not an overnight affair; it is a living art that keeps on evolving and taking shape perpetually. Unlike, a sculpture or a painting, a bonsai is never finished as it always keeps challenging the artistic abilities. Bonsai is not a dwarf species or a young sapling shaped as a tree; it is a craft where love and hard work is put over the years to create a piece of living art, resembling a mature, balanced and an aged tree.

- [Fitting in a small wonder](#)



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Key elements

Each element of bonsai must be proportional: The size of the tree, the thickness of trunk, its leaves or needles, its flowers or fruits, and the container in which it grows. The containers, especially, must be chosen carefully to be in harmony with the size, shape and colour of the tree.

Techniques to style a bonsai

To keep a bonsai in shape and maintain its miniature form, different techniques have been developed and elucidated.

- Pruning and pinching
- Wiring
- Root pruning
- Defoliation

Pruning and pinching

The terms pinching and pruning are used quite often and are sometimes interchangeable, but there is a distinct difference between the two. Both these techniques aim to counter apical dominance of bonsai and encourage back budding. Pinching is a technique of cutting back the current shoot or a tip to encourage vigorous growth; it is carried out using the thumb and a finger.

Pruning is carried out on deciduous and tropical plants. It is a technique of removing a branch or a stem that detracts the overall design of the bonsai.

Wiring

Wiring, followed by pruning and pinching, is the most significant and elementary technique to train and process styling of bonsai. Wiring is done by wrapping or coiling aluminium/copper wires around the trunk and branches to skillfully manipulate their placement and create an illusion of age and maturity. This is the quickest technique to style the tree as wiring makes branches and twigs pliable and holds them firmly in the desired position as long as is required for the trunk and branches to set. Care should be taken to prevent the wire from growing into the trunk or branches and it should be removed before any damage is done to the plant.

Generally anodised aluminium and copper wires of thickness varying from 1 to 8mm are used depending upon the thickness of the branch or trunk and are available at motor winding shops. Aluminium wire bends better and is easy to handle. Best time to carry out wiring assignment is from spring to early autumn when the bonsai is in growth stage.

Root pruning

No plant can stay in the same container for an indefinite period of time. Bonsai do best if there is an even balance of growth both above and below the soil level. During the process of growth of the bonsai, its root structure also grows, but within the confines of the container. When the root system becomes larger, the roots grow in length and encircle the rootball and fill the container entirely. When this happens, the roots are pushed upwards the container; this is an indication to repot.

Root pruning is an essential element when creating a bonsai. It means removal of thick and sick roots to encourage growth of smaller fine roots, which are much more efficient

in absorbing water and other nutrients from the soil. It is always handy to prune the roots at the time of repotting.

In nature, plants in search of water and nutrients send out many roots in various directions, but these plants, when trained as bonsai, need to be fertilised as their roots can't go out of the container to find nutrition.

Defoliation

It is a technique of producing smaller leaves on bonsai and is carried out by removing all the leaves during growth period. The process balances the bonsai of any negative area and creates a better canopy. Defoliate when:

- During growing season
- On deciduous and broad-leaved bonsai
- On healthy and well-growing bonsai; weak bonsai may not accept the activity that could further weaken the bonsai.

How it helps

- Stimulating overall growth of bonsai
 - Reducing the size of leaves and making them look proportionate to the size of bonsai
 - Increasing number of branches to make bonsai bushier by encouraging more leaves
 - Reducing inter nodal distance, an essential requisite in creating bonsai
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Styling

The key to having the perfect bonsai is to bring nature in miniature. The styles of bonsai, as articulated by the Japanese, are derived from different trunk line forms as they exist in nature. They are of great significance in the initial stages, but as one gains experience, gardening enthusiasts should experiment and use their skills to create bonsai of different shapes and sizes beyond the established styles to bring a variety to their collection.

There are five basic styles of bonsai; all other styles are derived from these basic styles.

Formal upright style: In this style, the tree grows straight upwards from a strong root system to a tapering tip forming a well-defined apex. The branches grow evenly in all directions; the lowest branch should be the longest and positioned sideways at approximately one third of the trunk's height, keeping in mind the height of bonsai to be created. The second branch is smaller and originates slightly higher from the side opposite to the first branch. The third is a back branch, tilted slightly towards one side for better visibility; it is responsible for giving depth to the tree. The length of branches and the distance between the branches should decrease as you get closer to the top of the tree, thus, giving the bonsai an outline of a shape like a triangular canopy.

Cascade style: This style of bonsai is modelled after trees that grow on steep cliffs in nature where they tend to bend downwards. The trunk first grows upwards from the soil,

and then curves down abruptly growing in a series of sinuous curves so that apex or tip of the tree extends below the base of its container. The first branch should be at the top and rest of the branches should be shaped to give a cascade effect. This type of bonsai appears to be struggling against gravity and should therefore be planted in tall, round or hexagonal pots; it is normally placed on the edge of the stand.

Semi cascade style: This style is very similar to the cascade style; the only difference is that the apex does not extend below the base of its container.

Other styles are windswept, literati, root over rock, driftwood, split trunk, twisted trunk, twin trunk etc. but all these styles are derived from the basic top five styles.

Slanting style: In this, the trunk is inclined to one side at 45 degree angle. This inclination gives an impression of great instability; it is balanced by a buttress of roots spread with strong roots on the side away from incline as well as one or two straight roots in the angle of incline. The lowest branch is the strongest and spreads in opposite to the incline of the trunk. The apex of the bonsai should be located either to the left or right of the root base.

Informal upright style: Here the trunk arises from a strong buttress of roots and grows upwards in a series of irregular curves to the top, which is curved forward slightly. The trunk line should be trained so that no bends face the front, but be either to the right or left. The trunk should be tapering with the branches growing only on the outer curves; the branches should bend slightly downward and decrease in length as they go towards the top.

— The writer is the President of Bonsai Society, Chandigarh and President of National Cactus & Succulent Society of India