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The Art of Bonsai
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The art of bonsai, pronounced “bone-sigh,” meaning “tree in container,” goes back over 1,700 years to the Chin Dynasty in China (A.D. 265 – 420) when the term “pen-tsai” was first used. It refers to potted landscapes using trees. In the T’ang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907), the art spread to Japan. The Japanese turned the word “pen-tsai” into “bonsai,” which is the term now known all over the world for this art form. Seeing them, the viewer is presented with nature in miniature - a very old tree, majestic in its upright stance, another tree wild and twisted by harsh weather conditions, or maybe one growing right out of a rock.

We may not be able to afford a bonsai that is truly old nor one that was created in Japan, but we can learn to create our own. There are established principles to follow, styles, and local plant material to choose from - all of which lead a person to learn about trees and what makes them thrive.

Some of the forms are: formal or informal upright, slanting, cascade or semi-cascade, broom and forest grove. Tree materials are easily obtained at a local nursery from landscape plants. There is no reason to buy a starter bonsai which is more expensive and - you miss out on the fun. Ideal plants are trees that tend to have small leaves, closely spaced branches, and some width to the trunk at the base. The larger the base of the trunk, the greater will be the illusion of height, especially when the tree is short. Think of trees growing in the mountains kept short by the weight of snow or bent by winds.

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Growing from seed is one way to start but an easier, faster way is to go to your local nursery and look for a juniper in a 5-gallon pot. Junipers are forgiving as starter trees and can be chosen by the way they are already growing - a prostrate juniper, *juniperus procumbens*, lends itself to the cascade style; a *juniperus chinsensis*, as a formal upright. Junipers can be heavily pruned anytime but root pruning should be done before new buds come out. They do well with wiring to hold the shape desired. They do need to be fertilized but with a much weaker solution to keep growth in check. Watering is important due to much less soil in the bonsai pot. And bonsai should not be kept indoors indefinitely unless they are tropical trees.

There is not enough room to explain the process in this article. However, there are bonsai clubs in the greater Sacramento region, including in El Dorado County, where the principles can be learned, observed and put into practice. There are helpful articles online that demonstrate the process as well. Just learning the principles isn't enough though – you need to be brave and have a sense of adventure! Don't be afraid to cut off that branch after determining it doesn't follow the desired shape and pruning quite a bit of the roots to fit into your beautiful clay bonsai pot is a must. Have no fear, enjoy the art of bonsai! And if you enjoy Asian gardens, be sure to visit the Japanese garden at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College – El Dorado Center. The garden is open On the second Saturday of each month, 9:00 a.m. to noon, till April 2019.

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.