

Bonsai species for the beginner

First questions

Beginners often ask, 'what species should I start with?' Experienced Bonsaists joke about how one must kill a few trees to learn how to do bonsai. The objective in answering the question is how to tip the scales so that their initial attempts have a higher chance of success.

Some key questions for the beginner to consider before deciding which species to acquire.

1. Do I have experience growing plants? Someone who has successful experience with landscape planting, vegetable gardening, or container gardening already has the experience of working with plant material, learning the species needs, and providing the correct environment. This is a plus. Some species are 'easy' and others are harder to maintain. Beginners should start with 'easy keepers.' Also see question 3.
2. What is my situation and environment for keeping trees? The most important question here is whether one lives in an apartment or condo with no place to keep a tree outdoors or do you have access to a yard or green house to keep trees in. There are species that can be kept indoors all year. Other species cannot and will die if kept indoors. In Colorado this means that those in the first group should start with a tropical tree like a Ficus, Jade, or Schefflera. Those in the second group can consider conifers, junipers, and other native material.
3. If I plan to go with outdoor trees, what are the native species in my area? For a beginner using native species is a safer bet as they are already adapted to the native climate and seasons. The beginner does not need to provide artificial environments to sustain them.

Sources for acquiring trees

The best source for acquiring trees is a local bonsai club. In addition to knowing that the tree is started toward a bonsai or is already there, there will also be a wealth of information about the care and cultivation.

Other sources, generally from least expensive to most: General garden nurseries and big box stores, local Bonsai nurseries, Bonsai dealers (there are plenty of these advertising on the internet).

Good species for Colorado

Indoors

As stated above good indoor species for beginners in Colorado are Ficus, Jade, and Schefflera. These are the 'easy keepers.'

Other possibilities include Bougainvillea, Camellia, Citrus, Gardenia, Hibiscus, Jasmine, Sacred bamboo, Serissa, Tamarind, and Chinese Zelkova

Outdoors

Generally, with outdoor trees there are those sold locally by nurseries and big box stores and those collected. Collected trees are Colorado natives like Ponderosa Pine and Rocky Mountain Juniper. Collected trees are not a good place to start for beginners.

Visiting a garden nursery with 10s or 100s of container trees of the same species can be intimidating. What to choose? How to choose?

1. Choose trees that are obviously healthy.
2. Consider the size of the tree. Five-gallon containers are much easier to deal with than 50-gallon containers.
3. Consider that most nursery stock is produced to meet the homeowner's criteria, nice straight trunks and on deciduous trees no branches for the first few feet, etc. These are not what is needed for beginner bonsai.
 - a. Choose a juniper over a pine. Junipers, even nursery stock, have good movement in their trunks and branches. Nursery pines typically do not.
4. Your first choices are going to be learning trees. It is more important to start with healthy stock than to wait until you find the perfect tree.
5. For deciduous material consider smaller (read shorter) landscape trees or woody shrubs instead of taller landscape trees. The shrub is sized more appropriately for a bonsai than a 10 foot tall maple. The latter can be made into a bonsai over the years but that is an advanced practice.
6. In Colorado, our temperature zones range from the cold Zone 3a (-40 to -35 degrees F. ave. low winter temp) to our warmest Zone 7a (0 to 5 degrees F. Know your zone. Check the zone rating for the tree. Just because it is being sold at a big box store down the street does not mean it is hardy for your zone.
7. You can always google <species name> bonsai for anything you are considering.

General 'rules'

1. Trees native or proven hardy to the beginners local are better to learn with.
2. Once a decision on a species is made, if financially possible and there is room, the beginner should consider acquiring 2 or more of the species. One way to kill a tree is to overwork it. Having more than one tree to work reduces the chance of killing it by over bonsaiing.
 - a. As a corollary with the same caveats, acquiring 2 or 3 species initially or at least in the first year is recommended to further reduce the possibility of over working a single tree.