

All the articles on this page also appeared in [The Gardiner](#) magazine, was written by [Gary English](#) and published with his kind permission..

© Gary English gary@cybersmith.co.za

© The Gardener Magazine - Editor: Tanya Visser tanya@thegardener.co.za

Appreciating Nature

Spring is sprung and by the time you read this article we should already be feeling the heat of summer. In Durban, at least, we are having an abundance of rain, more so than in the last few years for sure. The trees in my neighborhood are looking absolutely stunning. The fig trees abound with bright copper leaves that will turn green as they mature.

Erithryna (Coral Tree) and Schotia brachypetala (Weeping Boerboon) are shrouded with bright orange flowers, and the Jacaranda paint the landscape mauve. Fortunately I am a passenger on my way to work otherwise I would surely crash my car whilst looking to the heavens.

Why do I waste important print space with this rather obvious statement? Well, observing large trees in their natural environment is by far the best way to become inspired to do bonsai. Looking closely at full-sized trees can indicate to us what we can (and can't do) with our bonsai. On my daily trip I see virtually all the bonsai styles, upright, informal upright, cascades, slanting trees, fallen trees, windswept, lightning-struck, the works.

With the rush and pressure of everyday life, paying the rent, picking up the kids etc we often forget to slow down and look around us. The miracle of nature occurs constantly despite our best attempts to kill it off with pollution, deforestation and all of the other detrimental processes that we so casually justify in our pursuit of that other green stuff called money. In the last 8000 years, humans have deforested more than half of the world's natural forests to make way for towns, farms, roads and factories, and the pace of the deforestation is speeding up. We must enjoy and appreciate our natural heritage while we still have it.

OK, so you have stopped and looked. How exactly does one apply what one sees in nature to one's bonsai? See how those lower branches with heavy foliage droop toward the ground while the younger upper branches reach for the sky. Apply that to your own trees. See how all of the branches grow out toward the light? All of the smaller inward-growing branches have died. Why? Because there is less light toward the trunk, and the leaves will not receive any rain. Your bonsai might have inward growing branches because it is small and light can penetrate the foliage. Remove them.

Our main goal in styling a bonsai is to create a realistic but idealized representation of what the tree may look like if it were a full-sized tree. The word 'idealized' is key to the process. A large tree may have 50 or 60 branches. A bonsai with that many branches is really just a bush. We need to reduce the number of branches to 3, 5, or perhaps 7. Always an odd number, even numbers lack zen while odd numbers create movement. Nature works in a fairly random manner. Seeds fall where the wind blows them and not always in the best place for a tree to grow, resulting in deformities and anomalies. If the growing conditions were 'perfect' there would be no deformities and as bonsai growers we can control the growing conditions and as a consequence we can create 'perfect' trees without defying nature's great plan. We are not improving on nature (because that is not possible), we are just creating an optimum growing environment. However, it is also important to acknowledge that because very little in nature is actually perfect, some slight imperfections can actually enhance one's bonsai, making it more realistic. Getting the balance between realism and idealism right is the essence of the art of bonsai and is the factor that can elevate a bonsai grower from the level of gardener to lofty heights of the ARTIST.

So, next time you are out and about, stop every now and again, smell the roses and talk to the trees, you will be amazed at what they say back to you.