

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

Bonsai Tools

All art forms employ specialized tools from time to time and bonsai is no different. In this article we will discuss the two main tools needed for bonsai plus a few nice-to-have tools. Bonsai tools can be quite expensive depending on the quality, and country of origin, preferably Japanese. The benefit one gains from using the correct tool for a specific job far outweighs the cost and if treated with care will last a lifetime. Begin slowly and buy one at a time. As the tools all come in various sizes, choose medium sized tools that can be used for a wider range of jobs rather than the very small sizes that are especially made for very small trees.

The most important tool is the Branch Cutter which is the workhorse. It looks a bit like a pair of pliers with stout cutting edges set at a 45 degree angle. The angle is actually a very important issue when cutting fairly thick branches. A 45 degree cut is easier to make, leaves an oval scar which looks more attractive and heals much better. A 90 degree cut is harder to make, tends to crush rather than cut cleanly and is harder on the tool. The branch cutter is shaped in such a way that it makes a slight concave that allows the cambium (the active growing section of the bark) to swell as it heals, covering the hardwood. Eventually the cambium will completely cover the scar. This is called ? rolling over? . The cambium will take much longer to roll over if the cut is flat. It is interesting to note that animals that browse on trees and shrub like the Black Rhino have teeth that are designed by nature to cut at a 45 degree angle.

The blades of the branch cutter do not meet edge to edge when closed. This would make the edges blunt in no time. Instead, they overlap each other a little. When buying branch cutters have a close look at how the blades meet and make sure there is a slight overlap.

The second most important tool are Twig Shears. They look much like a pair of scissors with long narrow cutting blades that can get into tight places. They are light and easy to use, and as the name suggests are mainly for cutting twigs. They are also very useful for removing foliage and snipping the ends of new soft shoots. They are extremely sharp and give a very clean cut.

Nice to Have tools.

Root Cutters ? these are used for cutting roots and can be used for cutting heavier branches Knob Cutter ? these have rounded blades that give a hollow cut. They are used to hollow out the scar where a branch is cut. Tweezers/Rake ? to remove weeds.

Of course, one can get by without any special tools, and in fact for about 5 years before joining a bonsai club I used a cheap pair of kitchen scissors for just about everything, but at that point I had no real idea of what I was doing and my results were marginal at best. At this point I still only have three specialized bonsai tools in my toolbox and they allow me to do almost everything I need, although I think my results are still marginal, but that is not the fault of the tools but rather the fault of the workman.

There are specialized tools, and a plethora of other weird and wonderful gadgets that can be bought from a variety of bonsai suppliers and the various bonsai clubs. The less expensive tools are made in steel and are adequate for most bonsai enthusiasts, but if you really want to treat yourself they are all available in stainless steel. Stainless steel tools are easier to clean and maintain, really look much nicer, do not rust, but of course they cost more.

My toolbox also has a lot of cheaper tools and bits and pieces. An old fork bent at 90 degrees makes a wonderful weeding and raking tool. Avoid using expensive tools for working with roots because the sand and grit will damage the cutting edges. Rather use cheap scissors that can be bought from any hardware store or an old kitchen knife for root work. A set of wire brushes is useful for brushing the bark of your trees. This not only makes the tree look healthier, it is good for removing bugs and fungus that can harm the tree, and it also stimulates the cambium to grow more vigorously.

I also have a set of standard gardening shears for cutting really thick branches, and a pruning saw for branches that are too thick even for the shears. I have a couple of balls of raffia and wire in a wide variety of thicknesses for bending branches, an oily cloth for cleaning my tools as I work, wire mesh to put over the holes of my pots to prevent soil from escaping and a small container of rooting hormone for cuttings. Never use your expensive tools to cut wire! Use a pair of wire cutters. Many bonsai toolboxes contain a couple of chopsticks. When repotting a tree the new soil leaves air pockets, particularly between the roots, so wiggling with a chopstick will allow soil to get into those hard-to-get-to places. Some people like to tap the pot gently with a rubber mallet. Large cuts will leave the heartwood of the tree exposed. The cut must then be sealed by using tree sealer which is paste that comes in a tube. I prefer to use white wood glue for this purpose because it is much cheaper and does almost as good a job.

Finally, you will want something to keep your tools in. I use a plastic toolbox but it is quite bulky. A roll-up tool pouch is also a very good way of keeping your tools at hand, and is also a lot smaller than a toolbox.