

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

The Philosophy of Bonsai

Over the course of the last few issues we have dealt with many of the practical issues of keeping a bonsai healthy. Soil types, when to repot, pruning, bending and in the last issue we even went a bit technical with a discussion of auxins, growth hormones that control growth patterns in plants.

Now let's turn our attention back to the roots and the reasons why we grow miniature trees in the first place. We do it mostly because miniature trees look really awesome! When I see a well cultivated bonsai I am firstly impressed by the beauty of nature. I don't bother asking if the tree is an informal upright or a cascade. Categorizing living artworks in that fashion seems irrelevant, all that is important is that the tree or group of trees is visually pleasing.

For those who wish to spend time learning about all of the different styles and approaches to bonsai, there are simply heaps of good books and web sites available, and an understanding of the 'roots' of bonsai will certainly help in the creation of one's own artwork. However it is easy to get intimidated by all of the complex techniques, styling constraints, and the general mush of in-house jargon which can be found aplenty in this 3000 year old art form.

With over 130 'different' styles and numerous variations within those, you can be certain that whatever new and wacky contorted plant shape you can devise, some Chinese geezer has already done, they probably have five different terms for it, and it has probably even started some underground botanic cult or martial art form. Actually the eastern countries have taken the art of cultivating potted plants to extremes that one is unlikely to see in this country. In the Horai style of bonsai, plants are twisted and bent way beyond what one would find under normal growing conditions. These trees are shaped into creatures like dragons, snakes and octopus. The Penjin style, an ancient Chinese style, reflects Chinese lifestyle and philosophy and the styling does not conform to our standard set of bonsai rules. Ceramic figurines are often combined with the trees and together they often tell stories. They trees are given names like 'The Tiger Slumbers' and 'Rearing Horse in front of Two Pagodas'.

The simple rule is, 'There are no rules!' There are basic principles of composition and design. These apply to all art forms even music. A tree has a front. The design of the tree is built up based on the front view. The negative spaces, ie the gaps between the branches and leaf pads, are as important as the elements of the tree itself. Cut or bend branches away to enhance or increase negative space, and bend branches, or clip and grow to fill in unwanted negative space.

A creative use of negative space can be used to increase the drama of a thick and twisted trunk, or enhance the serenity of an elegant, slender tree.

We have many indigenous tree species that do not grow according to the traditional Chinese and Japanese styles. We have therefore developed a handful of African styles that the international bonsai community has embraced with open arms. These styles include the Baobab, the Flat Top, the Pierneef style, and the Bushfelt or natural style.

My advice is not to be too concerned with what style you are trying to create, just create something you like to look at. After all you are the one who is going to look at it. It has been said that the only difference between a bonsai and a 'plant in a pot' is that the bonsai has been styled with imagination and artistic interpretation, creating order from natural chaos, while the potted plant simply just grows.