

Miniature Desert Trees

By Tom Gatz

March 2008

(This article is modified and reprinted from the volunteer newsletter of the Desert Botanical Garden.)

A big drawback in having a relatively small backyard was that we couldn't fit in more desert tree species. Our remaining Argentine mesquite (the other blew over in a storm) now shades two thirds of our yard, leaving little space for other trees. Solution? I joined the two bonsai societies in town. I now enjoy growing many species of desert-adapted trees including elephant trees, palo brea, ironwood, velvet mesquite, Texas ebony, and rock figs with their exposed roots flowing over miniature boulders. Several shrubs are also beginning to take on interesting miniature tree forms in some of my pots, such as elephant food, *Euphorbia misera*, cascalote, Barbados cherry, bougainvillea, creosote, emu bush and Texas ranger. "Don't bonsai everything!" pleads my wife Barb.

Frowned on with concern by some plant-lovers with suspicions of plants being tortured in tiny pots, one tree book author even unfavorably compared the occasional root pruning of bonsai trees (which actually makes room for more soil in the pot) to the cruel and archaic practice of foot binding. In fact, no plant in my backyard gets as much care and attention as do these valued specimens pampered by bonsai enthusiasts. With proper care, your bonsai tree may well outlive you. One specimen at the National Arboretum is reputed to be over 380 years old!

Not to be confused with whimsical topiary, the aesthetic goal in bonsai is to give the illusion of a tree of great age by developing a thick, weathered trunk and encouraging downward slanting branches and branch ramification by strategic clipping or temporary wiring. Sensei Leroy Fujii recommended leaving spaces in the tree for imaginary tiny birds to fly between the branches. Just about any plant with a woody stem and leaves can be grown as a bonsai, but the most realistic ones have small leaves and thick, gnarly trunks. Potential places to find specimens with "character" are in the discount area of some nurseries and (with permission of course) from the yards of old, established neighborhoods that are undergoing renovation. Try to start with the thickest trunk you can find. Don't be in a hurry to put it in a bonsai pot. The best specimens often spend years growing in deeper "training" pots, where they more quickly develop the desired bonsai style.

Much of the knowledge about well-draining soil mixes and re-potting techniques I've gained from the CACSS has helped me in caring for my bonsai trees. Conversely, the knowledge gained from the bonsai clubs has given me new perspectives on pruning and shaping my succulent "trees" as well as my full-sized trees (my remaining big mesquite is acquiring a "windswept" style; artistic but also practical to better deal with the monsoon winds).

Many bonsai enthusiasts struggle (sometimes successfully) to keep pines and maple trees alive here in the desert. I'm not that skilled so I like to work with the desert plants that

should thrive here instead. Although not considered a true woody “tree” by bonsai purists, I think a great starter species is the succulent plant called elephant food (*Portulacaria afra*). It’s a tough little plant that thrives in full sun with minimal water. Its only Achilles’ heel is cold. Be sure to bring them inside if we ever get a recurrence of last January’s hard freeze. The elephant tree (*Bursera microphylla*), native to Arizona, is another great bonsai candidate. They often take on natural bonsai form where they cling to desert hillsides and get “pruned” by browsing animals and frost. They’re usually available at the DBG plant sales if you get there early! A new, and likely controversial, book entitled “Bonsai Succulents” (2007) by Phillippe de Vosjoli and Rudy Lime is loaded with intriguing photos.

If you would like to learn more about this ancient living art, contact these local clubs:
Phoenix Bonsai Society: <http://www.phoenixbonsai.com>
Scottsdale Bonsai Society: fairlee1@cox.net

Photo captions:

- 1) *Bursera microphylla*; informal upright style. Photo taken by Tom Gatz
- 2) Elephant Food (*Portulacaria afra*) is an ideal succulent plant for various bonsai styles. This is the slant style with an *Opuntia rufida* “Desert Gem” planted beneath it. Photo taken by Tom Gatz. (should it be *Opuntia rufida*?)

(should the book title be *Bonsai Succulents* instead of “Bonsai Succulents”?)