A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

THE ART OF BONSAI

How to choose and care for your first bonsai in Australian conditions.

Indoor v Outdoor
Season changes
Beginner friendly



BONSAI BOY

Bonsai has a reputation for being difficult. It isn't. A bonsai is simply a tree growing in a small pot, and it needs what every tree needs: light, water, air and food.

The catch is that a small pot leaves very little margin for error, so your tree relies on you. Get the basics in this guide right and you'll have a tree that keeps improving for years, even decades.

We've packed it with the same advice we give customers in our Melbourne studio every day: short, practical and free of jargon.

Happy growing, the Bonsai Boy team

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

01	Bonsai basics & choosing a tree	p.2
02	Light, position & your climate	p.3
03	Watering, the big one	p.3
04	Feeding	p.4
05	Pruning, wiring & tools	p.4
06	Repotting	p.5
07	Your year in bonsai	p.5
08	Troubleshooting & next steps	p.6

© Bonsai Boy · Melbourne, Australia

01 Bonsai basics

BONSAI IN A NUTSHELL

- **Bonsai is a technique, not a type of tree.** The word means "tray planting" (盆栽). Almost any woody tree or shrub can be grown as one.
- **They aren't genetically dwarfed.** They're kept small by regular pruning of shoots and roots, and by the shallow pot.
- **Most bonsai are outdoor trees.** Only tropical and subtropical species cope with living indoors long-term. This is the most common beginner surprise.
- **They can live for decades.** With good care a bonsai keeps developing year after year, and many are handed down through families.
- **Three things matter most:** the right spot, the right watering and regular feeding. Get those right and everything else is fine-tuning.

MYTH VS REALITY

- **"They're hard to keep alive."** They're no harder than any potted plant. They just dry out faster, so check them daily.
- **"Bonsai are indoor plants."** Most need sun, wind, rain and the change of seasons. Indoor-tolerant species are the exception.
- **"You need special skills to start."** Day-to-day care is simple. Styling skills come with time, and you can learn as your tree grows.
- **"A spray of water is enough."** Misting is not watering. The whole root ball needs a proper soak (see p.3).

Indoor or outdoor? Decide this first

Choosing a tree that suits the spot you actually have is the single biggest predictor of success.

	OUTDOOR BONSAI	INDOOR-TOLERANT BONSAI
EXAMPLES	Juniper, Chinese elm, Japanese & trident maple, azalea, cotoneaster, crab apple, conifers	Port Jackson fig, pot belly (ginseng) fig, *Ficus benjamina*, Little Ruby fig, jade (*Crassula*)
LIGHT	Direct sun, at least 3–4 hours a day. More for junipers and pines.	The brightest spot in the house, ideally with a few hours of direct sun through a window.
SEASONS	Needs the seasons, including winter cold, to rest (dormancy).	Grows for most of the year with no cold rest needed.
INSIDE?	Short visits only: 2–3 days to show off, then straight back outside.	Can live inside year-round. Enjoys warm months outdoors in a sheltered, part-shaded spot.

Choosing your first tree

- **Be honest about your spot.** Sunny balcony or courtyard: juniper, Chinese elm or maple (maples need afternoon shade). Indoors only: a fig or jade.
- **The most forgiving picks:** Chinese elm outdoors; Port Jackson fig (an Aussie native) or jade indoors. Jade stores water in its leaves, so it shrugs off a missed watering.
- **Check its health:** firm, evenly coloured leaves; no sticky residue or webbing; soil that isn't bone dry or sour-smelling.
- **Look for a trunk that thickens towards the base** and roots that grip the soil. That's the foundation of a good bonsai.
- **The pot must have drainage holes.** No exceptions.



Juniper
OUTDOORS
Full sun lover



Chinese elm
OUTDOORS
Tough & forgiving



Port Jackson fig
INDOORS
Bright light



Jade
INDOORS
Drought-tolerant

> **BONSAI BOY TIP**
>
> Every tree we sell comes with care instructions for its species. Keep them handy, because species-specific advice always beats general rules.

WORDS YOU'LL HEAR

Nebari *(neh-bah-ree)*
The surface roots flaring out from the base of the trunk. A strong nebari makes a tree look old and stable.

Foliage pad
A cloud-like cluster of leaves or needles on a branch. Pads are the building blocks of a bonsai's shape.

Dormancy
The winter rest outdoor trees take, triggered by cold and shorter days. It's essential to their long-term health.

Apex
The top of the tree. It's usually the strongest-growing part, so it needs the most regular trimming.

Root-bound
When roots have filled the pot and start circling it. Your cue to repot.

Jin & shari
Bare, bleached deadwood on a branch (jin) or the trunk (shari). Common on junipers, it suggests age and a hard life.

02 Light, position & your climate

- **Outdoors:** at least 3–4 hours of direct sun a day. Junipers and pines happily take sun all day. Maples and azaleas prefer morning sun with afternoon shade, or their leaves scorch.
- **Indoors:** in Australia, a **north-facing window** gets the most light, with east-facing (morning sun) next best. Keep the tree close to the glass, because light drops off quickly as you move into the room.
- **Rotate it** a quarter-turn every week or two so it grows evenly rather than leaning towards the light.
- **Avoid heating and air-con vents** and draughty doorways. They dry foliage out fast.
- **Pick a spot and stick with it.** Moving a tree stresses it. Indoor figs in particular may drop a few leaves after a move, so give it a few weeks to settle.
- **Short on light?** Dark rooms, offices and winter months can leave indoor trees starved of light. A grow light fills the gap with a set-and-forget timer.

SHOP LED Bonsai Grow Light →



Indoor trees want the brightest spot you have. Close to a big window is ideal.

WHEREVER YOU ARE IN AUSTRALIA

TROPICAL & SUBTROPICAL NORTH

Figs and other tropicals thrive outdoors year-round. Maples and other cold-loving species may struggle without a proper winter.

COOL, TEMPERATE SOUTH

Deciduous trees and conifers do brilliantly. Shelter figs and jade when nights fall below about 6°C, and move outdoor trees under eaves during hard frosts.

HOT, DRY SUMMERS

Give afternoon shade or light shade cloth (around 30–50%) in heatwaves. Keep pots off hot concrete and away from west-facing walls.

WINDY OR COASTAL SPOTS

Wind dries small pots in hours. Find a sheltered position, and check water more often on blustery days.

03 Watering, the big one

Incorrect watering kills more bonsai than everything else combined. A small pot holds a small reservoir, and in summer it can empty in a single day.



A gentle flow soaks the soil without washing it out of the pot.

- **Check every day; never water on autopilot.** Push a fingertip about 1 cm into the soil. Slightly dry? Water. Still damp? Wait and check tomorrow.
- **Water thoroughly.** Keep going until water runs freely from the drainage holes, then water again a minute later so the whole root ball is wet.
- **Expect the rhythm to change with the seasons:** often twice a day (morning and evening) in hot weather, but perhaps only once or twice a week in winter. Keep checking.
- **Never let it dry out completely,** and never leave it sitting in a saucer of water. Soggy roots rot.
- **Rescue a dried-out tree** by sitting the pot in a sink or bucket of water until the bubbles stop, then let it drain.
- **Don't rely on rain.** A light shower rarely soaks a bonsai pot properly.
- **Misting isn't watering,** but it does lift humidity, which indoor figs love.

BONSAI BOY TIP

Water indoor trees over the sink, let them drain, then return them to their spot. A slate tray underneath protects your furniture from drips.

2-in-1 Watering Can & Mister → | Amber Mist Sprayer | Slate Bonsai Tray

04 Feeding



Why it matters: a tree in the ground sends roots out in search of nutrients. A bonsai can't, and the little soil in its pot runs out of food quickly. You're its only supply.

- **When:** through the growing season, early spring to late autumn (roughly September to May). Indoor tropicals can be fed lightly all year round.
- **How often:** a liquid feed every two weeks. Our Plant Nourishment goes in at ¼ teaspoon (1 ml) per litre of water.
- **Water first** if the soil is dry, then feed. Fertiliser on dry roots can burn them.
- **For steady background feeding,** add slow-release organic fertiliser to the soil surface every 8–10 weeks in the growing season.
- **Don't feed** a sick or bone-dry tree, a freshly repotted tree (wait about a month), or deciduous trees in winter dormancy.
- **More isn't better.** Overfeeding damages roots and produces big leaves and long, gangly shoots.

SHOP **Plant Nourishment →** Nourishment Pack

The Ultimate Nourishment Pack combines liquid feed, slow-release fertiliser and neem oil in one box: the whole year sorted.

05 Pruning, wiring & tools

TWO KINDS OF PRUNING

- **Maintenance pruning** keeps the shape. Do it little and often throughout the growing season.
- **Structural pruning** means removing larger branches to set the tree's design. It's best done in late winter or early spring, just before growth starts.

HOW TO PRUNE

- **Rule of thumb for leafy trees** (elm, fig, maple): let a new shoot grow 4–6 leaves, then cut it back to the first 1–2.
- **Cut just above a leaf or bud** that points where you want the next shoot to grow, usually outwards.
- **Remove** branches that cross others, grow straight down or back into the trunk, or compete from the same point (keep the better one).
- **Junipers are different.** Never give them a "haircut" across the foliage, because the cut tips turn brown. Cut long shoots individually with sharp scissors, and always leave some green on every branch. Junipers won't re-sprout from bare wood.
- **Hold off on heavy pruning** in the two months before winter and during heatwaves.

WIRING BASICS

- Use aluminium bonsai wire about **one-third the thickness** of the branch, coiled at roughly 45° from the base outwards.
- Check it every couple of weeks while the tree is growing. **Cut wire off before it bites into the bark;** don't unwind it.



THE BEGINNER'S TOOLKIT

Pruning shears	Fine, precise trimming of shoots and leaves. Chikamasa Shears · Bonsai Scissors
Branch cutters	Remove thicker branches cleanly for faster healing. Branch Cutters
Wire cutters	Snip wire off without nicking the bark. Wire Cutters
Chopstick	Test moisture and work soil into gaps when repotting. (Free from your takeaway drawer.)

LOOK AFTER YOUR TOOLS

Wipe blades clean after every use to avoid spreading disease. Store tools dry, and give carbon-steel blades a light coat of oil to stop rust.

Japanese Made Tool Kit → All Bonsai Care

PRUNING AT A GLANCE

Chinese elm
Trim new shoots back to 1–2 leaves all season. Very forgiving, and buds back readily even from older wood.

Figs
Let shoots reach 6–8 leaves, then cut back to 2–3. The milky sap is normal; just wipe it away.

Juniper
Scissors only, one shoot at a time. Thin out crowded pads so light and air reach the inside.

Maples
Trim new shoots back to the first pair of leaves in spring. Avoid big cuts in summer heat.

Azalea & serissa
Prune straight after flowering, or you'll remove next season's flower buds.

06 Repotting

Why repot? To refresh tired soil, trim the roots and stop the tree becoming root-bound, where roots circle the pot and can no longer take up water and food properly.

- **How often:** young, fast-growing trees every 1–2 years; mature trees every 3–5 years.
- **How to tell:** each spring, gently ease the tree out of its pot. Roots circling the outside? Time to repot. Still mostly soil? Check again next year.
- **Other signs:** water sits on the surface or runs straight through, or growth has slowed right down.
- **When (most species):** late winter to early spring, just as buds start to swell (around August–September in most of Australia).
- **When (figs & tropicals):** wait until nights are reliably warm, usually mid-spring to early summer.
- **Avoid** repotting during heatwaves or in the depths of winter.

STEP BY STEP

1. **Prepare:** water the day before. Have fresh bonsai soil, pot mesh, a chopstick and sharp scissors ready.
2. **Remove** the tree, cutting any wires that anchor it to the pot first.
3. **Comb out** old soil from the sides and bottom with a chopstick or root hook.
4. **Trim** long and circling roots, taking no more than about a quarter of the root mass.
5. **Re-pot:** mesh over the drainage holes, a thin layer of soil, then the tree. Fill around it, working soil into every gap with the chopstick.
6. **Aftercare:** water thoroughly and keep it sheltered from hot sun and wind for 1–2 weeks. No fertiliser for about a month.

USE PROPER BONSAI SOIL

Standard potting mix and garden soil hold too much water and lead to root rot. Bonsai need a free-draining mix.

Premium Bonsai Soil → | Or let us do it



Repotting a juniper: old soil out, roots trimmed, fresh soil in.

07 Your year in bonsai

Southern Hemisphere seasons. Timing shifts a few weeks earlier in the warm north and later in cool or alpine areas.

Spring — SEP – NOV

- Growth kicks off; start feeding.
- Repot most species early in the season.
- Structural pruning before buds open; wiring.
- Watch new shoots for aphids.
- Indoor trees can holiday outdoors once frosts pass. Start them in shade and ease them into sun.

Summer — DEC – FEB

- Peak water needs: check morning and evening.
- Afternoon shade during heatwaves.
- Keep feeding; trim new shoots regularly.
- Repot figs and tropicals early, once nights are warm.
- Keep pots off hot surfaces. Grouping trees together helps them share humidity.

Autumn — MAR – MAY

- Deciduous trees colour up and drop leaves.
- Ease off feeding outdoor trees by late autumn.
- Finish heavier pruning at least two months before winter.
- Treat any pests before the cold arrives.
- Scrape off old fertiliser crust and top up with fresh soil.

Winter — JUN – AUG

- Outdoor trees rest (dormancy). Keep them outside; they need the cold.
- Water less, but never let them dry out.
- Shelter from hard frost and hail; bring tropicals in on cold nights.
- Clean and sharpen tools ready for spring.
- Late winter: plan your repotting.



Trident maple turning red in autumn, the start of its winter rest.

08 Troubleshooting

WHAT YOU SEE	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Yellowing leaves, soil always wet	Overwatering, poor drainage or the wrong soil	Water only when the top centimetre is slightly dry. Repot into bonsai soil in the right season.
Crispy brown leaves or tips	Dried out, heat stress or hot wind	Soak the pot until the bubbles stop. Give afternoon shade and check water twice daily in heat.
Indoor fig suddenly dropping leaves	A recent move, a draught or too little light	Keep it in one bright spot away from vents. It usually re-shoots within a few weeks.
Juniper going brown or thin	Kept indoors, not enough sun, or "haircut" pruning	Move it outdoors into full sun. Prune shoot by shoot, never across the foliage.
Long, pale, stretched shoots	Not enough light	Move it to a brighter spot or add a **grow light**, then prune the stretched shoots back.
Sticky leaves, small bumps or white fluff on stems	Scale or mealybug	Wipe off by hand, then treat with neem oil, included in our **Ultimate Nourishment Pack**.
Fine webbing, dull speckled leaves	Spider mites, which thrive in warm, dry indoor air	Rinse the foliage, raise humidity with regular **misting**, and treat with neem oil.
White powdery coating on leaves	Powdery mildew (common on maples and crab apples)	Improve airflow, remove affected leaves and avoid wetting foliage late in the day.

THE FIVE CLASSIC BEGINNER MISTAKES

1. Underwatering, especially in summer
2. Too little sun for the species
3. Keeping an outdoor tree indoors
4. Skipping fertiliser in the growing season
5. Leaving it in the same tired soil for years



READY FOR YOUR FIRST TREE?

Start with a Bonsai Starter Kit

Everything in this guide, in one box. Each kit pairs a hand-picked, beginner-friendly tree with the essentials to look after it:

- **Your tree:** juniper, conifer, flowering serissa and more, each one individually styled.
- **Chikamasa pruning shears,** made in Japan.
- **Bonsai Plant Nourishment** and a **2-in-1 watering can & mister.**
- ***Bonsai 101 Essential Tips***, plus species care instructions and an optional gift card.

They make a brilliant gift too. Delivered across Melbourne and to VIC, NSW, QLD, ACT and SA.

Shop the Starter Kit range →

LEARN HANDS-ON
Private one-on-one bonsai lessons, from complete beginner to advanced.
Book a class →

REPOTTING SERVICE
We'll trim, shape, wire and repot your tree, then nurse it back before returning it.
Get a quote →

BONSAI FOR YOUR OFFICE
Melbourne workplaces: fully maintained bonsai rental with a free one-week trial.
Try it free →

Questions about your tree? We're always happy to help.

lauren@bonsaiboy.com.au · **0433 196 520** · **bonsaiboy.com.au**

© Bonsai Boy. General care advice only. Always follow the care card supplied with your tree.