

# Miniature delights

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ANUSHA K. learns of the intricate art of bonsai cultivation.



**W**HAT is bonsai? I always have been intrigued by it. As a child, I thought they were from a certain dwarf-like species that never grew.

Well, I was right and wrong. Apparently, bonsai can be crafted from any plant. For example, bougainvillea can be crafted into a bonsai by controlling its growth through frequent trimming and pruning.

However, since its leaves are big and it is a flowering plant, it could face difficulties after three years or so.

Bonsai is derived from two words — *bon*, a shallow tray or container, and *sai*, growing a plant or planting.

It is actually the process of making miniature versions of larger trees and plants, using the same materials used for a normal plant but a bonsai requires more attention and care.

Most local bonsai are usually with leaves only, but there are flowering types, too. Originating from China, bonsai can be found in most Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan and Indonesia. It can also grow as big as a normal tree.

Mrs Ong, of Pusat Bonsai Hobby, decided to open a nursery specialising in bonsais because such plants, if well-taken care of, can last for generations and can be an added treasure.

Despite it being just a hobby that she and her husband undertook, she has grown to love the plants and have added some to her own priceless collection.

"Many customers have asked for these miniature bonsais, which are 15 years old. Some have even offered a hefty sum but after all my hard work, I just can't part with them," added Ong.

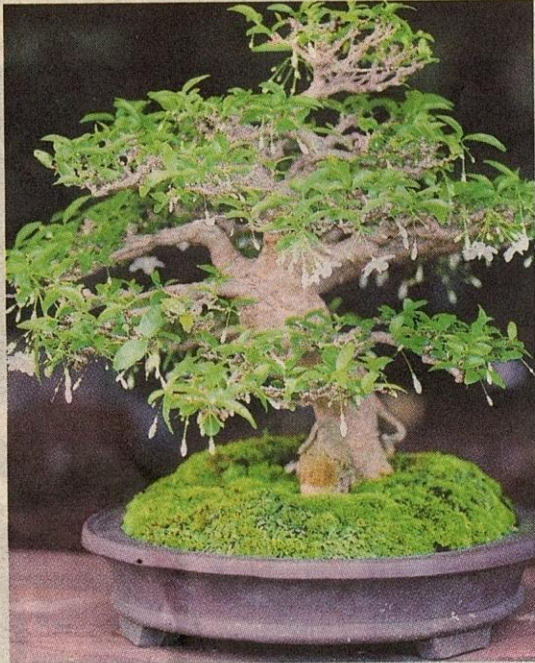
A small bonsai can be purchased from RM8. The price can go up to thousands of ringgit for a big plant that has been well-kept for years. You can shape your bonsai into various shapes; some of the popular shapes include the broom-style (with fan-shaped arrangement of the branches), cascading and clinging to rock or rock planting (the roots of the bonsai is usually entwined with the rock).

**Visually attractive, a bonsai can last for years, if it is well-kept.**





**Premna  
Obtusifolia**  
styled in a  
cascading  
shape.



**Water Jasmine.**



**Ficus Microcarpa**

### **How to maintain a Bonsai?**

A hands-on approach is the best way to maintain a bonsai. If you are thinking on starting your own collection of miniature bonsai, make sure you have the time and patience for it. Unlike the usual flowering plants which do not require constant pruning, a bonsai should be trimmed regularly to maintain its shape and beauty. Once you lose the shape, it may be hard to start again.

Besides watering the plant twice daily (once if it rains), you will need to add organic fertiliser once a month.

Depending on the species, you will need to trim the leaves or remove the flowers. Some plants can wilt and die if there is insufficient water and if it is left indoors. A bonsai should be left outdoors as it will probably only last a week indoors.

You can cultivate bonsai in an apartment provided it gets at least two to three hours of sunlight a day, from the balcony. However, it will be better if you purchase a small bonsai rather than a big plant due to the space constraints.

Its height depends on the preference of the caretaker. If you prefer a miniature-sized bonsai, be sure to change the soil (repotting) every three years. As you slowly remove the root from the pot, make sure you trim the roots slightly and put new soil back into the pot. It should be kept away from the sun for at least two weeks.

Use only red soil (burnt earth soil) to keep the plant warm. Also known as burning soil, the water drains out faster, thus doesn't hamper root growth. Use only clay pots as they will keep the roots cool due to evaporative cooling from the container walls. Porcelain pots, meanwhile, may cause direct heat and, the roots

**Bonsai requires frequent trimming and pruning.**

may suffer.

You should buy the pot according to the size of the tree (if you want the plant to stay in a miniature form, get a small pot).

Moss growing on the surface of the soil may be good for the plant but it may attract insects. Ants may start a colony and even dig out the soil, causing a slight mess. To avoid this, water the plant first before spraying it with a water-based mosquito spray.

As for yellow leaves, it occurs because the leaves are very old or have insufficient water. So, pluck them.

To start shaping a bonsai, begin with a miniature plant and try to maintain its shape from a young age. It would take approximately two years to achieve the desired shape.

To maintain the right shape, you will need to fix wires on certain branches to restrict its growth. Some of Ong's regular customers return after some time to learn how to fix the wires and maintain its miniature size.

**Here are a few types of local Bonsai plants:**

***Wrightia Religiosa*** (Water Jasmine): This plant can be found in Malaysia and is also known as water jasmine. A tropical plant, this plant produces jasmine flowers.

Compared to the usual jasmine plant, the flowers of which are usually used to make flower garlands, the petals are different though they smell the same. You can control the flowering process as it flowers 28 days after the leaves are trimmed.

This plant can grow to a size of a normal tree but you can maintain its shape by frequent trimming. The end result is a compact, bushy plant that is visually pleasing. Water twice a day. A small plant costs RM8 from most nurseries.



**Ficus Microcarpa:** There are hundreds of ficus species. Ideally, this plant grows well when grown over a rock. Trim the leaves at least once in three months and allow moss to grow on the surface of the soil so that the plant can retain moisture. This plant also requires full sunlight and if the leaves turn slightly yellow, it may be the result of insufficient sunlight. Add organic fertiliser once every two weeks.

When buying a ficus plant, always ask questions as some of the species originate from China or Taiwan and thus, cannot survive in our local climate.

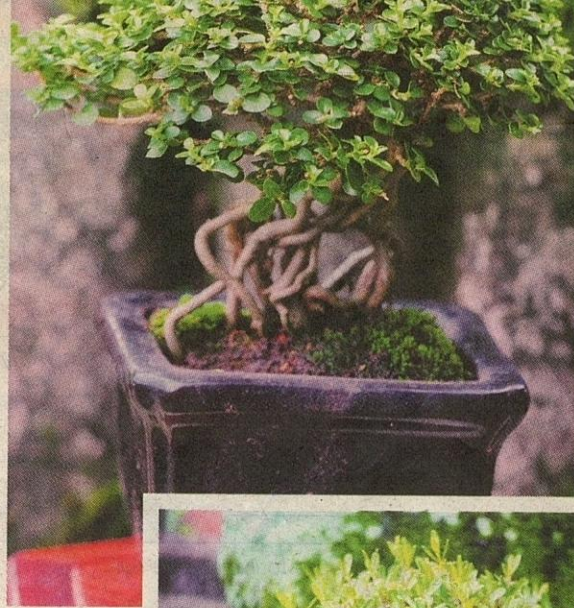
**Premna Obtusifolia** (Beras): Known locally as *beras*, this plant can easily be shaped. It only requires once a month trimming, continuous sunlight as well as organic fertiliser. Its bright and shiny leaves, with its twisted trunk, is a sight to behold. It is usually grown as a miniature as you can easily reduce the size of its leaves. Ask an expert in a bonsai nursery on how to reduce the size of its leaves).

Wiring is required as it grows fast and can look untidy. A raintree shape is suitable for this type of bonsai.

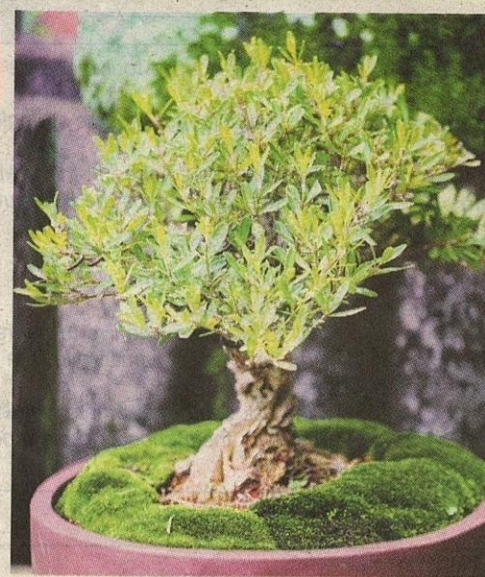
**Podocarpus Macrophyllus** (Buddhist Pine): For this species, which requires moderate sunlight, you will need to trim the leaves every four months or so. Always remember to use an organic fertiliser as the plant is not very hardy and can easily wilt after three days if it's the wrong fertiliser. The Malaysian species has sharp-edged leaves while the Taiwanese variety has round edges. It is most often styled upright and it does not bear flowers.

Most local nurseries do not sell bonsais, so go to a nursery that specialises in it. All plants featured can be purchased at Pusat Bongsai Hobby, No 1, Sek. 10/1, Jalan Gasing, Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

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**Premna  
Obtusifolia.**



**Buddhist Pine.**



**A variety of miniature bonsais.**