

Bonsai Basics Teaching Program

By Dennis Makishima

INTRODUCTION

MOTIVATION

The premise of this guide is that we in the bonsai community want to increase the numbers of newcomers to bonsai who will find long-term satisfaction with bonsai as a hobby and as an art form. This challenge is important and we believe that we can improve how we address it.

We would like to see all clubs emphasize a “we care” and a “welcome to the family” attitude towards all newcomers. Many bonsai clubs can find ways to improve their ability to handle the influx of beginning bonsai students. One of the most effective methods is to arrange a standard bonsai basics program. This can prevent newcomers from feeling overwhelmed and confused by the apparent complexity of the art of bonsai. In addition, bonsai clubs need to address the concerns of some newcomers that the overall cost of doing bonsai; the courses, suggested tools supplies, and plant material seem too expensive.

Many clubs have bonsai “basics” or “beginners” classes, but there is still room for improvement. The Golden State Bonsai Federation (GSBF) believes that the teachers of these basic classes can do a better job of teaching with some help, and with some standardization of the knowledge being taught in the bonsai basic classes within the state.

GOALS OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to help the individual bonsai clubs cultivate a group of skilled teachers for basic bonsai instruction. This is not a system intended to create bonsai masters. That requires a totally different level of commitment and sacrifice.

This guide is meant to help train teachers and those dedicated bonsai enthusiasts who wish to assist in basic bonsai instruction in the GSBF clubs. What is needed for these important tasks is a good grasp of the bonsai basics and the ability to communicate to eager students. Our goal is to help teachers learn how to teach and to communicate the love, skill, and appreciation of bonsai using good communications skills, teaching ability, and natural enthusiasm. It is our intent to help establish a program of standardized bonsai basics instruction, and to cultivate a set of well trained teachers who can successfully instill basic bonsai knowledge into the students.

This guide is also intended to complement the individual uniqueness of each bonsai artist as a teacher. For those teachers of an existing bonsai basics class or curriculum, please teach the way you feel is most effective for you. We would like you to consider our suggestions as a way to standardize these courses. All teachers have their own techniques of teaching and all clubs are unique. Thus, each club will require instruction according to its own make-up.

A bibliography of existing teaching materials, including books, magazines, and videos is included. Many of these well-regarded reference materials cover a great deal of information including the basic bonsai styles, the variety of tools, pots, and stands. This guide will be fairly brief-it is not intended as a comprehensive teacher's manual. One of the goals of this guide is to simplify as much as possible the instruction of basic bonsai.

APPROACH

It is essential that teachers be trained to teach these basics courses. This training includes a mastery of the basics and training on how to work with different types of personalities, backgrounds, and age groups, assigning assistants, and keeping order in the classroom. It will also be helpful to have a written procedure manual that the teacher can use to help set up the beginner's bonsai course.

We want to suggest hands on instruction, simple and workable plant material, and inexpensive basic tools. Initially keep it simple, stay with the five basic styles, and use aluminum wire. Convince the students that a bonsai tree is achieved through a step-by-step process, each step of which they can learn. Avoid intermediate techniques such as severe cutback, grafting, air layering, shari, bare rooting, and repotting into a shallow pot.

Try to keep the cost of basic bonsai instruction at a minimum, if possible, for free. This could be realized if the teachers volunteer their time and the club pays the cost of the meeting place. If the students do not have wire, the club can decide to supply the wire. Try and keep the plants inexpensive by using durable varieties and by limiting the size. For new students, suggestions can be made at a local nursery. Try and minimize the number of tools needed and the number of books and videos suggested.

Whenever possible, the student should do the majority of the work. This is how the bonsai truly becomes the student's bonsai. This means the teacher and student together develop a plan for the bonsai. This allows the student to be involved in the decision making process and allows the student to have a sense of ownership. With enthusiasm and dedication shown by teachers, a student's first introduction to bonsai basics will become a very enjoyable experience.

Teachers should not do the plant for the student even if the final result is not totally satisfactory. As a teacher, do not let your ego get in the way. Try not to worry if the final product is not perfect. The final result does not have to be a masterpiece. Over time, let the students find their mistakes and then correct them. Learning from mistakes can lead to mastery.

Repeat and reinforce all the time. Correct problems in basics immediately. If wiring is bad, have them redo the wiring. The position of a branch on the trunk is a basic skill (according to the style of the tree). The feel and the mood of a branch come later. This is a matter of artistic interpretation, which is not a basic skill, but an individual artistic skill

Knowledge of the fundamentals can eventually produce good bonsai. Develop good habits in the bonsai students. Teachers need to teach by example that bonsai is a long-term hobby; it is not just for immediate

gratification. Remember that bonsai is a continual process. Always try to stress patience and the long-term goals of bonsai.

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Although this guide is intended primarily as a reference guide for teachers of bonsai basics in the setting of a relatively small class, there are two related issues that are difficult to separate. The first issue is how to cultivate a set of people interested in becoming basic bonsai teachers. The second is the issue of how to deal with classes that are larger than can easily be handled by one teacher. Both of these issues are addressed by training a set of bonsai teacher's assistants.

The teacher's assistant is one of the most valuable members of a bonsai club. He or she should be a member with considerable knowledge of bonsai and possibly the desire to one day be a teacher. Teaching assistants can also be a cadre of volunteers who do not wish to ever be bonsai teachers. Through their efforts, these volunteers help fellow students, the teachers and the overall success of the clubs.

The teacher should set the tone for the class and the duties of the assistant so that the whole class or workshop clearly understands what the assistant's role will be. The teacher should give support to the assistant, but the first and primary goal of the teacher is to teach bonsai to the students. In a workshop situation, the assistant's duty is to facilitate and to aid the teacher by reinforcing the teacher's message. If the assistant gives contradictory information to the new student the result is often confusion and doubt. Meanwhile, the assistant should keep in mind ideas of how to teach the same subject on the day when the assistant becomes the teacher.

When club members have an interest in a more formal teaching role and the responsibility of imparting good bonsai skills to the club members, they may wish to approach the club leaders to be considered for future teacher's positions within the club. It is part of the teacher's role to recommend areas for improvement in the assistant. These include general teaching skills, bonsai terminology, horticulture knowledge, and more advanced bonsai techniques. In this way, individual clubs can cultivate a group of skilled teachers for basic bonsai instruction.

THE IDEAL BONSAI TEACHER

(A set of characteristics to aspire towards; no particular order)

- is a lover of bonsai.
- is knowledgeable about bonsai basics.
- is knowledgeable about elementary horticulture.
- is motivated to help others learn about bonsai.
- is prepared and organized to teach.
- is a good communicator.
- is patient with students.
- is able to handle different types of student personalities and abilities.
- is always supportive and positive.
- is able to phrase comments and critique in a positive light.
- is able to quickly memorize the names of the students.
- is motivated to keep in contact with first year students.
- is receptive to suggestions.
- is open to critique of teaching technique by other teachers.

- is mindful of the importance of repeating the basic rules often; gently but persuasively.
- is constantly adding to and building on the basic theory.
- is always ready to help a slower student.
- is willing to share a positive sense of humor.
- is willing to admit to limitations in knowledge.
- is willing to find answers to difficult questions.
- is aware of a student's limited ability to absorb new information.

GENERAL CLASSROOM GUIDELINE

CLASS SETUP

1. An ideal class size is up to seven (7) students with one teacher. Try and keep the class to this size where possible.
2. New teachers should start out with 2-3 students, and then increase as they feel more comfortable.
3. For classes up to twelve (12) students, it is recommended to use one (1) teacher and one (1) assistant.
4. For classes up to twenty (20) students, it is recommended to use two (2) teachers and two (2) assistants.
5. Try to limit students to no more than 4 per 6-foot table.
6. Provide a sign in sheet for the students, and name tags.
7. Provide the right equipment, tables and chairs, table covers, visual aids such as blackboard or white board or sketch pad, example trees, wire as needed, and clean up equipment such as trash cans, and brooms.

CLASS PLANNING

1. Always keep order in the class, with good planning and enthusiasm.
2. The teacher works the room – assistants (if any) follow.
3. If assistants are used, all of the teaching should be consistent.
4. If there are two (2) teachers in a large class, they should start from different sides of the room without overlapping.
5. Have students located close enough to one another so that a lesson for one easily becomes a lesson for all. Use this to do mini demos from time to time in the class.
6. Certain Types of material can be used to explain to the class the style and the care of a particular type of bonsai.
7. Give first priority to the health of the plant.
8. Avoid working on unhealthy plants.
9. Try to keep plants in the containers while doing work on them.
10. If the plant is too deep in the pot, cut the rim down on plastic pots.
11. Emphasize that massive reduction and repotting in the same year is not good for the plant.
12. No stunts or fancy techniques beyond the level of the students.
13. Plants should never leave the room in a dangerously fragile state: we do not want the plants to suffer and perish while in the student's care.
14. The pace of the class is very important.
15. Try to answer the student's questions.
16. Slow down the impatient students. Do not let them rush through the bonsai project. Try and get them to think out the style and the technique. Stretch their imagination.

17. Do not slow down the whole class because of slower students.
18. The assistants can be used as tutors to help slow students keep up.
19. For students with a short attention span, try and keep them busy. This is especially important for younger students.
20. If the student and the teacher are pleased with the bonsai, then give praise and encouragement to the student.
21. Mention things to be done at home, including plant care and further styling.
22. Have students make the final corrections to the style of the tree.
23. Now is a good time to mention other basic bonsai styles that would have worked for this tree.
24. Stress the need for patience in the development of the plant into a mature bonsai.
25. Anytime is appropriate to give horticultural information to the students.
26. Focus on the weaker parts of each student's skills, and try and raise this skill.
27. For students that have very weak hands, both the young as well as the older or arthritic, help them bend, or saw, or cut off branches.

THE CLASS

1. Introduce yourself, any assistants, and the class members.
2. Start each class with some general information or a theme, and give the students an idea of the goals and expectations for the class.
3. Often it is convenient to start helping the students in the order of their arrival.
4. The first time through the class, encourage students to all listen to the first round of instruction – spend approximately five (5) minutes with each student.
5. No student should have to wait more than 30 minutes before being helped. Ask the students what they see in their plants, the style, the characteristics, and the essence of the tree (feeling, mood location found in nature). After the student's response, the teacher can offer an opinion. If the student's interpretation will work, then try and work with it.
6. If the student feels comfortable with the plan for the bonsai, then encourage the student to work on the plant.
7. If the student cannot verbalize an interpretation or a plan, mention a few alternatives to the student in order to see the student's visualization.
8. If the student needs help in a large class, the assistant, who has followed the teacher and understands the agreed upon plan, mention a few alternatives to the student in order to seed the student's visualization.
9. If the student in a large class does not know how to wire, the assistant can start the process and allow the student to finish.
10. If a student appears to be afraid to work on the plant, start off first with very easy, safe tasks such as cleaning up debris, finding major roots, pinching oversize growth, cutting out small weak under growth, etc. Accomplishing these tasks can often build confidence.
11. If a student has absolutely no knowledge of bonsai, and no comprehension of how to start on a plant, try to ask a few leading questions such as:
12. In nature, what does this type of tree look like?

13. Does the plant weep, or cascade?
14. Does it have fruits or flowers that will be a focal point? Is the trunk special or attractive?
15. Does the tree have an obvious back?
16. During the second and subsequent passes through the class, the teacher can better understand the abilities of each student.
17. Ask them what they are thinking about concerning their bonsai project.
18. If they are on the right track, then have the student continue along in their work.
19. Encourage fast learners to continue with their plant.
20. Focus on a specific task or assign an assistant to the slower learner. Answer questions that came up during the first tour of the room.
21. Give out further advice and suggest potential corrections. Continue to emphasize that the students do their own work. Continue to stress the basics, repeat and reinforce.
22. When the student is styling the bonsai, there is no need to point out all of the little mistakes. Hopefully, as the session continues, the student will discover these mistakes and correct them.
23. During the final stages of the class, a discussion of undetected errors or oversights can be helpful.
24. There is no harm in having a plant leave the room with some minor errors.
25. If students can find the errors, they will have learned a valuable lesson.
26. End each class with an assignment, a little homework. Mention things to be done at home, including plant care and further styling.
27. Always impress on the students that learning and enjoyment of the art of bonsai is the true goal.
28. The learning is a continual process – we are never really done.
29. Show them that you sincerely care. In the long run this promotes camaraderie.

AFTER CLASS

Evaluate the class, what went well, and what needs improvement.

BASIC CURRICULUM A basic bonsai curriculum should minimally consist of the following topics:

The 3 basic bonsai styles

Plant material

Initial clean up work

Finding the line and the front of the tree, by studying the trunk and roots

Basic tools

Wiring techniques

Pruning and pinching

Basic soil

Bonsai pots

BASIC STYLES (Japanese terms are in parentheses)

FORMAL UPRIGHT (CHOKKAN)

A primarily conifer style with a straight trunk, often with a powerful taper of the trunk.

INFORMAL UPRIGHT (MOYOGI)

A curved trunk, with major branches on the outside of the trunk curves and the apex over the base.

SLANT (SHAKAN)

A slanted trunk, with major branches on the outside of the trunk curves and the apex over the base.

HALF CASCADE (HAN KENGAI)

A trunk that leans mostly horizontal to one side.

FULL CASCADE (KENGAI)

A trunk that falls below the pot rim, usually with curves in the trunk and branches extending from only the sides of the trunk.

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL STYLES

WIND SWEEP

A variation of the slanted style with all or most of the branches flowing away from the base of the tree.

TWO (2) TRUNK

Two trunks with one tree dominant.

CLUMP

An odd number of trees that appear to come from the same base.

RAFT

A group of trees that are really branches from one trunk laying on its side.

GROVE

A small group of individual trees. Repotting skills are needed and after care is critical.

DEAD WOOD or DRIFTWOOD STYLES

A tree with a lot of dead wood as an important part of the design. Carving skills and tools are needed.

ROOT OVER ROCK

A tree with its roots trained over a rock.

APPROPRIATE PLANT MATERIAL

Plant material for beginning students is recommended to be a one (1) gallon container as a minimum size so that there is something substantial to work with. Whatever is fairly durable in the particular area is a good choice. It should be inexpensive, easy to keep alive, easy to shape, and easily reduced in size. Pines are not a good first choice because they require too much long-range work and theory for beginner. Azaleas are also usually not a good first choice since they are typically very brittle. Junipers are often a very good first choice, shimpaku junipers in particular. As the students progress in their skill levels, larger plant material can be introduced. Be sure to distinguish between evergreen and deciduous plant types.

INITIAL CLEANUP WORK

Have the student begin by cleaning up the plant material. This gives an opportunity for the student to get acquainted with the material and to begin to feel comfortable. Once the material is cleaned up, the front and the basic line of the future bonsai can be visualized.

FIND THE FRONT AND THE BASIC LINE

A natural or attractive line, with the potential apex moving towards the front

Minimal or minor scars in the front

A good powerful spread of roots, and the most stable appearance of the trunk

Sometimes the front is found by finding the back first!

BASIC REQUIRED TOOLS

1. HAND SHEAR (basic garden pruner type)
2. SCISSOR TOOL
3. CONCAVE CUTTERS
4. WIRE CUTTERS (American pliers with a cutting edge are okay)

WIRE AND WIRING TECHNIQUES

Aluminum wire in sizes of 1.5 mm, 2 mm, 3 mm, 4 mm, and 5 mm diameter. Avoid copper wire at this stage. Teach a simple wiring technique of about 60 degrees with every wire balanced for the size of the branch and spanning two branches for good anchoring. Start with the trunk and then move to the smaller branches in descending order. Do not insist on every last branch being wired at this stage. There is a whole lifetime to strive for that goal. Emphasize the need to pay attention to the tree so as to avoid wire cuts. Discourage wiring of deciduous trees since they often wire cut so easily.

PRUNING AND PINCHING

Teach pruning flush at this stage. Jin and Shari are an intermediate technique.

Try and emphasize the importance of pinching to keep the bonsai compact and full. This also encourages frequent interaction of the bonsai student with their bonsai.

BONSAI SOIL

A basic soil mix is a combination of drainage material such as coarse sand and planting mix (60/40). Increase the percentage of organic material for deciduous trees, and decrease the percentage for conifers. Make sure that the average student can keep alive an average plant for a reasonable time.

BASIC POTS

A bonsai pot needs at least one drainage hole for the health of the bonsai. The pot used to frame the bonsai creation and so the shape, color and size needs to harmonize with the tree. Use unglazed pots for conifers and glazed pots for deciduous trees to provide contrast in the bare winter season. Wire a screen into the bottom of the pot to keep the soil in, and the sow bugs out. Use one or more tie-down wires to hold the tree firmly in place so that the delicate hair roots are not damaged by the tree moving in the pot.

**APPENDIX A:
EXAMPLE OF CLASS
OUTLINES**

1 YEAR or CONTINUOUS CLASS

An excellent time to start a 1-year class is January. Consider a class structure that meets once a month for a year. Start with a 45-minute talk on the basic styles and on the basics of wiring. Include a discussion of wiring first on the main trunk and then onto the major branches using one wire for two branches. Have an example of each style present for the students to visualize and to use as a model for the future. A small 1-gallon juniper can serve the purpose here; a mature bonsai is not necessary for each style.

Monthly or every other month introduce a new style. As mentioned before, try and encourage each student to become involved in their tree. It is helpful to supply the material so as to ensure appropriate material and consistency. Try to discourage repotting at this time.

After about 10 lessons give a short talk about repotting. Introduce the basic ideas about soil, root pruning, drainage, and tie down wires. Talk about the correct time to repot the major types of plant species. Hopefully this talk will prepare the students for next year's repotting. Consider giving a short demonstration of repotting into a bonsai pot.

At the conclusion of the year, review what was covered over the year with plenty of examples from the class. Where possible try and identify the students who are mastering the basics and are ready for more advanced instruction within the club.

3-DAY CLASS

DAY 1:

Introduce the basic styles, wiring tools, plant material, and the culture and care of the young bonsai material. Have a hands-on workshop, based on the discussion that concentrates on one style.

DAY 2:

Hands on workshop.

DAY 3:

A hands on workshop, some review of the material, and a short talk on repotting.

1 DAY CLASS

In the morning, introduce the basic styles, wiring, tools, plant material and the culture and care of the young bonsai material. Have a lunch break where the students stay together and discuss what they heard, and to answer questions. In the afternoon, have a hands on workshop, based on the morning's discussion that concentrates on one style. The informal upright is often a good first choice.

APPENDIX B: BASIC JAPANESE TERMS

Important Terms

| | |
|------------|-------------------------------|
| Mame | Less than 6" |
| Shohin | Less than 10" |
| Chokkan | Formal Upright Style |
| Moyogi | Informal Upright Style |
| Shakan | Slanting Style |
| Kengai | Cascade Style |
| Han Kengai | Semi-Cascade Style |
| Bunjin | Literati (free) Style |
| Shari | Exposed dead wood on trunk |
| Jin | Exposed dead wood on branches |

Nice to Know Terms

| | |
|--------------|--------------------------|
| Shito | Up to 3" Tall |
| Chiu Bonsai | 12 - 24" Tall |
| Dai Bonsai | Over 24" Tall |
| Sekijoju | Tree planted on Rock |
| Ikada Buki | Raft Style |
| Kokidachi | Broom Style |
| Ishitsuki | Clinging to a Rock Style |
| Sharimiki | Driftwood Style |
| Kabudachi | Clump Style |
| Ne Tsuranari | Connected Root Style |
| Nejikan | Twisted Trunk Style |
| Bankan | Coiled Trunk Style |
| Negari | Exposed Root Style |
| Yose-ue | Forest Style |

**APPENDIX C: BASIC
BOTANICAL LATIN**

Abies: Fir
Acer: Maple
Buxus: Boxwood
Carpinus: Hornbeam
Cedrus: Cedar
Chaenomeles: Flowering Quince
Crataegus: Hawthorn
Cupressus: Cypress
Fagus: Beech
Ficus: Fig/Banyon
Ginkgo: Ginkgo
Juniperus: Juniper
Larix: Larch
Ligustrum: Privet
Malus: Apple
Olea: Olive
Picea: Spruce
Pinus: Pine
Prunus: Stone Fruits (Flowering Fruits)
Pseudolarix: Chinese Larch
Punica: Pomegranate
Rhododendron: Rhododendron, Azalea
Quercus: Oak
Salix: Willow
Sequoia: Coast Redwood
Sequoiadendron: Giant Redwood
Serrisa: Coffee, Gardenia

**APPENDIX C:
BOTANICAL LATIN
(cont.)**

Taxodium: Bald and Montezuma Cypress

Taxus: Yew

Tsuga: Hemlock

Ulmus: Elm

Zelkova: Gray Bark Elm

APPENDIX D: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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11. The Essentials of Bonsai published by Timber Press.

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2. International Bonsai published by The International Bonsai Arboretum.
3. Bonsai Today published by Stone Lantern Publishing Company.
4. Bonsai Magazine published by Bonsai Clubs International
5. Bonsai published by the American Bonsai Society.

Videos:

1. GSBF Convention Video Tapes
2. Bonsai Design Series, Volume 1 and 2 Forests by Warren Hill
3. Bonsai Video, Brooklyn Botanical Gardens
4. Introduction to Bonsai, Volume 1
5. The Growing Art of Bonsai

**APPENDIX E:
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This guide is the cumulative effort of many people. Dennis Makishima pioneered the effort towards a standardized basic bonsai instruction program over the last several years. A GSBF committee composed of Bobbie Burr, Michael Greenstein, Mel Ikeda, Ron Kelley, Cheryl Manning, Lyn Stevenson, John Thompson, and Chris Westvig worked on this guide. Dennis continued to guide the committee as an advisor. We expect that this document, like bonsai, will continue to grow and to evolve.