



# Easy Bonsai. Seriously!

May 25, 2022 | General | 3 comments

Recently I have spent too much time ranting and raving about things unrelated to bonsai. I assume that's why lots of my loyal readers come here, to find out something about little trees. So, in the interest of balance here's a tree story about just how easy bonsai *can* be. I'll do my best to stay on message, but first.....

When you attain a certain age it becomes apparent that anything worth achieving is a lot harder than it appears. I have spent endless time over the last decade of writing blog posts talking about just how hard it is to master the creation and maintenance of bonsai trees. After more than thirty years 'at it' I categorically believe it takes ten years just to know which end goes in the soil.

After three decades of insanely dedicated effort I am still a very long way off creating what I now consider to be a real and significant bonsai tree. That's because as we progress down the road of this endeavour and learn more our goal recedes before us in direct correlation to our understanding of what a real bonsai tree actually is.

Many folk will not understand this. Some will consider I am talking a lot of old w\*\*k or being self-deprecating. Others may consider this to be false modesty. However I

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genuinely believe I am about as far from reaching the goal as I was the first day I stuck a seedling in a pot. The level at which I consider a tree in a pot becomes bonsai is now a lot higher than it once was.

I see a lot of keyboard warriors on social media making a name for themselves with really shoddy poor quality immature trees. In a lot of quarters what is classed as bonsai really is not and it's sad to me that the standard of quality is so low. To a degree it's always been that way, look at some old bonsai books from the '80s or '90s. Many of the colour plates feature what we might call 'raw material' today. Sure there are some folk doing really good work but not many, at least not in the UK.

My old mate Blacky used to say '*Bullshit baffles brains*'. I looked that up and found....***To talk or write absolute nonsense but do so with such conviction everyone comes to believe it unquestioningly.***

He was also often heard to say "*you can't educate pork*" (He was an award winning pig farmer!). Again I Googled that and got.. ***When somebody won't listen to reason.*** It's my opinion that a lot of us settle for what's comfortable or easy in life because to achieve more is potentially difficult or just too demanding of us.

The perceived quality of anything is in direct correlation to the experience of the individual. Back when I was a spotty teenager I got off my crappy 50cc, 4 horsepower Fizzy and plonked my bum on a 17 horsepower 125cc Honda. I thought I owned the most powerful machine in existence, my God what a machine. However now I have

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ridden two wheelers with over 200 horsepower those little bikes feel like they couldn't pull the skin of the proverbial desert.

Bonsai was the same in my experience. When I visited my first local club show I thought I had passed through some sort of portal into a different world. However, having been lucky enough to get around a bit over the years I don't think that any more. I am a lot harder to impress these days. Kevin Willson pushed me pretty hard back in the day and insisted I went to see stuff and it raised the level of my game a lot.

Eventually striving for perfection becomes self perpetuating, progress fuels progress. That's when the standard to which one works really begins to accelerate. However it's important to bear in mind the law of diminishing returns here before our self imposed standard becomes realistically unachievable and it all comes crashing down around ones ankles like a pair of worn out Y fronts.

Just once in a while it's good to park all that ambitious and pretentious bullshit and just have a little bit of fun mucking about with plants for one's own entertainment. Over the last few years I have discovered a species that allows the practice of bonsai technique with remarkably fast results like nothing I have ever seen. This is a species little known in the UK that you will probably not see in a show but personally I absolutely love it. So, what am I talking about? Go on, take a guess before scrolling down.

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Wikipedia describes it thus....

***Portulacaria afra*** (known as **elephant bush, dwarf jade plant, porkbush, purslane tree** and ***spekboom*** in Afrikaans) is a small-leaved succulent plant found in South Africa. These succulents commonly have a reddish stem and leaves that are green, but also a variegated cultivar is often seen in cultivation. They are simple to care for and make easy houseplants for a sunny location. In frost-free regions they may be used in outdoor landscaping.

Bear with me here.... When I was a little kid my Nan' instilled in me a love of cacti, she had some monsters. Eventually I had every windowsill in the house chock-a-block with the prickly little beggars. Portulacaria bring that back all these years later.

So, here's the portulacaria I started as a 5" tall, pencil thick cutting just seven (yes 7) years ago.



Portulacaria Bonsai Tree 7 years from a small cutting.

The stupid and misleading phrase 'Indoor bonsai' has done a lot of damage to our hobby and precluded a lot of wonderful species from our repertoire. Ficus for instance, one of the greatest species possible for the creation of bonsai trees. I know we live in the relatively cold north but a lot of these warm climate species are adaptable enough to grow here. I also consider it a challenge to learn and master the care of these beauties. Any knucklehead can keep hardy natives alive, right? Mastering a species that cannot possibly survive in our country is a true horticultural challenge which in this case is not entirely hard. At least it isn't now I know how to do it. Portulacaria are **EASY** when you know how and that's a nice change from the normal battle of trying to push water uphill.

So first let's get the obvious out of the way. You can't freeze a portulacaria, not unless you want to make a

smoothie out of it. Apparently they are edible. In the wild it can grow very dense and can survive an overnight frost with light foliage losses but let's not confuse a cold desert night with our British winters shall we.

Portulacaria is best overwintered at 3° to 10° Celsius. Any warmer and it will get confused and try to grow and will also likely drop a lot of leaves. The cool winter will force dormancy which in turn will push a hard and fast summer expansion.

In winter mine live in the poly-tunnel with a heater set to kick in at three degrees above freezing so it's pretty cold all the time. At the same time I keep the soil dry. Maybe once a month it gets a splash of water. It's also important to keep the air moving to prevent fungal blooms. Overwintering in your house is likely to be too warm and too dry. However I am guessing a conservatory with good light ought to be pretty good.

Once the spring temperatures reach a consistent 12°+ all day portulacaria will begin to grow. Again, in the poly-tunnel I would typically expect to do a first pruning around the end of May. Once growth starts plants will appreciate full direct sun, even in a tunnel or glasshouse these are NOT going to get too hot. It's a fact they are actually fire proof and readily survive brush fires. Mine love it when summer temperatures get above 50° and do their best work. These are summer plants and once it gets warm and light look out!

Once you see steady growth it's time to begin the propagation of new stock and this is the best bit. A party

trick that, by and large, only succulents can perform. Any piece of stem can be rooted. I once rooted a 10" diameter stump so here's how to make as many plants as you could ever need.

Around end of May, or when good growth is consistent, prepare cuttings thus. Just chop off the bits you don't need. No matter whether it's a little shoot tip with a couple of leaves, a bit of branch, a whole branch or even the loose end of a trunk chop. Cut the stump end cleanly with a sharp knife and leave it overnight to dry out. A wet stump in the rooting medium could rot easily.

To root I use any old bonsai soil mix I have to hand. A lot of pumice seems to work wonders. Dump this in a plastic pot about half full, put the cutting in and fill to the rim sufficient to hold it still and upright. For big cuttings I use a deep pot filled to about 1/3 with soil and then rely on the pots sides to hold my cutting still. So long as the cutting is not wagging about it's good and the stump end needs to be well submerged in the medium.

These cuttings then go into the greenhouse, a shady corner out of direct contact with sun and out of the wind works best. Keep the soil very lightly damp. Constant wet causes rot. Don't be surprised if the leaves go a bit soft and the surface wrinkles, that shows it's all working as it should. Assuming it's warm you will have roots in a couple of weeks and after two months the pots will be solid with root. Don't take cuttings after the beginning of August, it's unlikely they will be established sufficiently before winter.

I then simply pot on into larger pots every time the plants get too big and falls over a lot. Just keep on with that until the trunk is the size you want. Portulacaria can be shaped with wire but this is fraught with issues and unless you are a master of the wire stick to tying, pulling and pushing with bits of wood etc'. All pretty much standard bonsai stuff really.

Re-potting of portulacaria bonsai is done any time from June to mid-August. I use a reciprocating saw to get the bulk of material out of the way and then rake back to the margin of the nebari and smaller roots. In a bonsai pot I use a mix of **Pumice** and **Moler**. Not too much moler because it's too acidic about 10/15% on average. Portulacaria will grow in anything so long as you manage it properly.

Allowing portulacaria bonsai to grow out a good bit at the height of summer really helps keep the vigour high. I would normally do my last prune towards the latter half of September.

I use **Green Dream Original** exclusively for fertilising from end of May until beginning of September.

In the UK creating *truly great* bonsai of any species is not really possible in the way someone might in Japan, Taiwan or the Mediterranean countries, we just don't get enough sun and the growing season, even with a greenhouse is just too short. I figure we just have to do the best we can by refining and perfecting our techniques.



So, I grew a big stock plant. It was about 6' and forever in my way so I cut it up.....



Portulacaria. A big lump I chopped off the top of a 6 footer.



Cuttings I took off the big cutting. Every bit of a portulacaria will root. Old bonsai soil used for rooting.



Let the cut end dry out overnight before placing into soil.



Pot half full. The pot sides hold it upright securely whilst roots form.





Little sticks used to keep everything secure.



Completed cuttings. Those long thin ones are what I grew the big one from 7 years ago.



Nebari forms readily with conventional techniques.



Tall pots always produce better growth in all raw material. This one really helped my tree to bulk up. Once it was the size I wanted it went into the bonsai pot as seen below.





I've a long way to go before we call this bonsai but i thoroughly enjoyed the process at every turn. BTW this is it's first pot six months after planting. Never be in a hurry to put raw material into bonsai pots.

## 3 Comments



1.

Peter Goldsmith on May 26, 2022 at 9:56 am  
Absolutely inspiring.



2.

Nigel on May 26, 2022 at 2:46 pm  
Your veiws on what constitutes a bonsai tree are a little too esoteric for me.  
I'm happy with my collection of around thirty trees which don't make too many demands on my time but still give

me a true sense of achievement with the knowledge that whilst not playing God, the effort I put in to their care and wellbeing is amply rewarded by a display of nature I never thought I could be part of.

Whether you have a seven year old starter Chinese Elm or a hundred year old Japanese Black Pine the sense of being a small part of that trees future is truly inspiring.



3.

Alain Garbaccio on May 29, 2022 at 7:15 am

Hi ,

Thanks for a great article. I live in South Africa where Spekboom grows freely and the great debate amongst Bonsai growers is whether or not it can be classified as a bonsai .In the wild , it has a beautiful flower as well. As you mentioned , it is a very easy plant to manage with supper quick good result. As a bonus, some sub-species have very small leaves indeed compare to others which is a real bonus.

Regards

Alain Garbaccio

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