

BANYAN TREES FOR BONSAI

(FICUS)

by Yvonne Padilla

In the world of Bonsai the Banyan tree is widely considered an excellent choice for Bonsai. "Banyan" is a common term applied to the sprawling members of the Ficus species that develop multiple trunks from descending aerial roots, it is important to note that Banyan does not refer to one particular species or variety of Ficus. Ficus species are not popular landscape trees due to their tendency to overwhelm everything in their vicinity. Referring to the "Guinness Book of Records 1991," is the great Ficus benghalensis located in the Indian Botanical Garden in Calcutta. This tree boasts 1,775 supporting aerial roots, a circumference of 1,330 feet, covers three acres and dates back to 1787. Because they grow wild and with willful results, they are usually propagated and sold for interior use. Because of their fast growing habits in warm climates, they make a perfect specimen for Bonsai. As Bonsai they can be controlled.

AERIAL ROOTS

Banyans will develop aerial roots under the right conditions. For development, shade, high temperature, high humidity and moist soil are the major elements required to inducing aerial roots. Short, shaggy roots descend from upward-angled trunks and branches. As the roots grow they reach the soil level and as they thicken they will fuse with the main trunk. If they descend further out on branches they will implant farther away from the original trunk and make separate trunks. It is the grower's choice to leave the roots on or remove them.

FRUIT

Most varieties of Ficus bear fruit, some varieties faster than others. The tiny figs vary in color from green when they first appear, to dark brick red with light green spots as they mature.

LEAVES

It is said there are over 1200 varieties of Ficus. Therefore there are many with different shaped leaves. Once the tree is established in a bonsai container, the entire tree may be defoliated in late spring. The newly formed leaves will be even smaller and proportionally better for Bonsai.

PROPAGATION

Propagation is very easy from tip, twig, branch and even root cuttings. Air layering is also another easy method of starting a new tree. Propagation by seed is not possible, due to the fact that when most Ficus species were removed from their native habitats, their highly specialized pollinating wasps did not accompany them.

STYLE GUIDELINES

The Ficus canopy is best suited for a broom, clump, informal, forest, formal, saikei or multiple trunk style. A full canopy gives the sense of balance and proportion. It is up to the individual whether the canopy will show separations "for the birds to fly through" or will be a closed, dense and uniform silhouette. Some separation or indication of levels is always attractive, and shows the wonderful branch structure and twiggling that is so much a part of this variety of tree.

CONTAINERIZATION

In spite of the massive size these trees can grow, the general feeling of these trees is feminine. Bonsai trees are usually classified as masculine or feminine. This has some effect on the decision of the shape and color of the container. A container should compliment a tree with softness and rounded corners. Ideal containers are round, oval, trays or irregularly natural shaped rock slabs. With the exception of a single trunk tree the containers should be shallow, otherwise they will overwhelm and de-emphasize the trunks. Ideal colors are earth tones, muted blues, white, cream and some shades of green. The color of the container is up to the owner of the tree.

HORTICULTURAL CARE FOR BONSAI

Moderate moisture is a must for Ficus, a well-draining soil mix will ensure that the succulent roots do not rot. A mix of equal parts sifted soil, Haydite and if you wish to add sand is a safe mix. They will grow under a variety of conditions. Full sun will produce smaller leaves, but leaves may not be a dark lush green. In partial shade the leaves tend to be longer and have longer internodes. They will adjust to indoors. They will require good lighting and placed in a tray of water with pebbles for humidity. A slow release fertilizer may be used or they may be fertilized on a regular bases during the growing season with any well balanced fertilizer. Growing season is about nine months in Corpus Christi. They should be protected from freezing temperatures. Since they are tropical, they should be protected below 40 degrees.

VARIETIES USED FOR BONSAI IN THE CORPUS CHRISTI AREA

Nerifolia, Phillippinense, Strangler Fig, Green Island, Retusa, Golden Gate, Emerald Green, Kingsman, Natal, Bertt Davey, Kiki and Ficus Too Small.