



Bonsai is Japanese and means “tree in a pot”. But bonsai are not a proper plant species and there are no special bonsai seeds either! Bonsai are absolutely normal trees and shrubs that can be found in nature, too. “Yes, but why are they so small?” some people might want to know.

The first question, however, should be: where does the art of bonsai stem from? Contrary to the general opinion it does not have its origin in Japan. This art stems from the Chinese Empire and is called penjing, “landscape in a pot”. Already in the early Han Dynasty from about 200 BC to 220 AD artificial landscapes with lakes, islands and rocks were reconstructed in the palace gardens.

According to legend a magician was living at that time who had the ability to conjure up entire minimised landscapes onto a tray. The oldest image of a penjing dates back to the period between 618 and 907 AD. It was discovered in the burial chamber of Prince Zhang Huai and shows a miniature landscape with small trees and rocks. Only in the 11th century was the art of bonsai brought to Japan by Buddhist monks. And this is where the art of creating landscapes in pots was perfected.

Nature

And why are the trees so small now? This is due to the intensive and special care given to them such as cutting leaves and roots, wiring and shaping through cutting. By cutting them back regularly, the size of the branches and the leaves are in proportion to the size of the root. Wiring influences the shape of the bonsai. Depending on the part of the tree to be formed, the trunk or the branches are wired in a spiral shape with special wire and are bent into the desired shape under utmost care.

Many laymen believe that this treatment literally cripples the tree. This, of course, is not true, for nature does not treat trees gently. Storm, hail, wind and many other natural phenomena form the trees, too. Most bonsai do not die from faulty cutting or wiring but from wrong watering or fertilising.

By the way: if one were to plant a small bonsai from the pot into the garden, it would become a tree of normal size within a few years.

Bonsai are classified according to size and shape. The smallest trees are called “Mame” and grow about 15 cm high. It is, however, difficult to keep that size for several years, so that they are often grown to become taller bonsai. The most common bonsai size is between 16 and 29 cm and is called “Ko”. The next category is called “Chui” and has a size from 30 to 60 cm. Taller trees belong to the last bonsai category named “Dai”. They come in different styles such as straight, sloped and windswept style as well as broom, cascading, double trunk, forest and rock style.

When it is carefully looked after, a bonsai can become many hundred years old and will grow to be very precious. These trees are usually inherited from one generation to the next.