

Good things come in small packages

If you want to try your hand at bonsai, two enthusiasts recommend reaching out to your local community to help you get started.

WORDS GRETCHEN CARROLL

Bonsai is the ancient art of creating miniature trained trees. Brendon Covich, President of the Auckland Bonsai Society, has about 150 bonsai trees ranging in size from 5cm to 1.5m high. He started growing bonsai 31 years ago, after a friend introduced him to it – and while he killed his first plant, he's never looked back.

"Bonsai is a good way to express your artistic ability; also, to let go of your ego," he says. "I never consider myself the owner of the trees as such, because these trees will be alive a lot longer than me. There are generational trees that have been passed down. You get a personal connection to some trees, especially with the ones that I've grown myself, either from seed or cuttings. I love getting into nature, even getting to understand that we're nature ourselves – we're all one."

The Auckland Society meets once a month, and Brendon says there's always something to learn, even for him after 31 years.

"I recommend beginners get the knowledge of people who have already done it, and don't try to run before you walk. A lot of people, when they try to get information off the internet, it's good, but they can only treat it as guidelines due to the differences in climates and seasons. Even from here in Auckland to somewhere like Wellington, we use different methods on our trees."

He says beginners shouldn't be intimidated by bonsai. "People can get a little bit put off, thinking, 'wow, there's so much involved' and there's something mysterious and magical. It's not, it's just the basics first and then enjoying spending time with the tree."

There are a few things to consider, he says. One is leaf size. So you're aiming for leaves that are proportionate to the final size of the bonsai.

"You want it to look like an old tree at the end. It's going to look unusual if it has huge leaves. We're trying to create something that

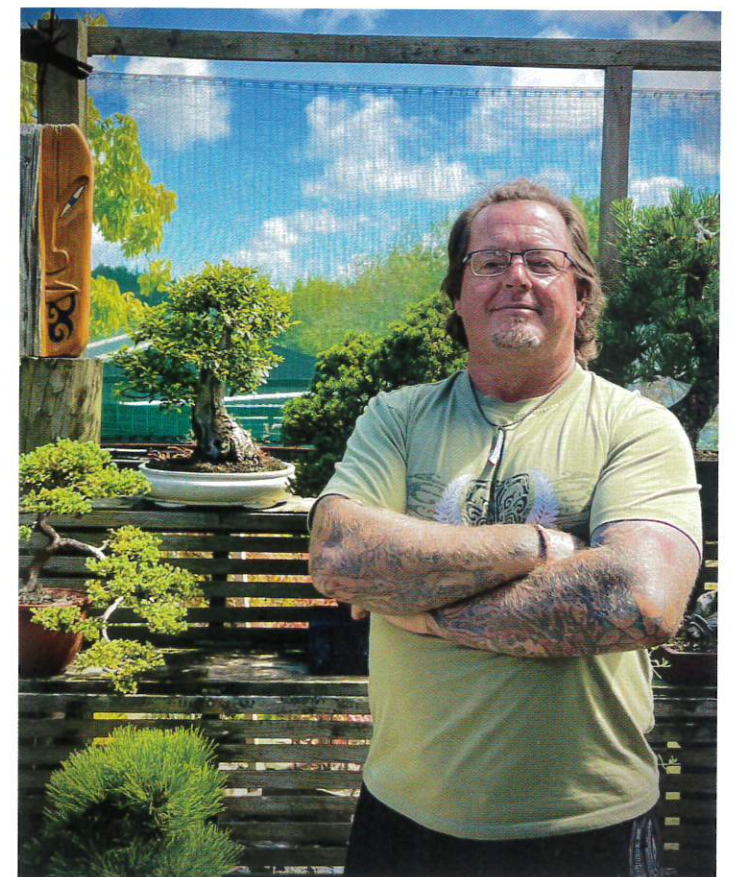
looks as natural as possible and hasn't been interfered with by human hands too much. That's the difference between bonsai and topiary."

Also consider that the difference between growing bonsai in a pot and field growing (in the ground) is that it's easier to obtain a trunk in the ground, as it grows larger more quickly than in a pot.

Brendon suggests repotting your bonsai about every three years as a general rule when the trees are younger, and pruning the roots, which will help it to keep its shape.



ABOVE Imperial-sized bottlebrush (*Callistemon*) bonsai originally from the wild, as indicated by the huge trunk.



FROM LEFT Lynn (left) and Brendon (right) both recommend getting involved with your local bonsai club when you start out.

"But as soon as you do that, don't apply a lot of work to the top of the tree at the same time, because it's not going to have the root system to support that, and you'll kill the tree. So a lot of it is about timing," he says.

"There's no such thing as instant bonsai. It's equally important to know when *not* to work on the bonsai as it is to know when to work on the bonsai."

Brendon says more young people have come through the Auckland society recently. "I think people are searching for something to get back to their 'roots'. Bonsai is therapeutic. People want a connection with trees and plants, and bonsai can offer them that – plus there is the social side, so it's a win-win."

Brendon runs his own workshops, which people find out about through word of mouth. "There's not many people in the bonsai community who don't know me in New Zealand, and that's a great thing about us all."

FROM AUCKLAND TO OTAGO

At the other end of Aotearoa, Lynn is on the Otago Bonsai Society's committee and is Secretary of the New Zealand Bonsai Association. Her love of bonsai began about 15 years ago when she did a workshop with the Otago Bonsai Society, and free membership was included.

"I find it relaxing, because when you're working on your trees, you're fully concentrating on what you're doing. You can spend hours and suddenly realise what the time is," she says.

The Otago Bonsai Society meets monthly, with usually a demonstration or an open workshop, sales table, raffles and 'tree of the month', when members can bring along trees in particular categories. They finish the night with a cuppa and an informal chat.

BONSAI SIZING

Not all bonsai are the same, and there are various styles and sizes. For instance, some styles include different slants or incorporate elements such as rocks. There are different size categories, differentiated by the number of hands required to lift them:

- Large: Imperial (eight-hand) is more than a metre high.
- Medium: Chiu (two-hand) is 41–91cm high.
- Small: Shohin (one-hand) is about 20cm high, and mame (one-hand) is about 10–15cm high.

An eight-hand, imperial bonsai is thought to require four people (eight hands) to move the tree!





1. A shohin-sized Korean hornbeam that has been air-layered. 2. A root-over-rock-style *Ficus natalensis* grown from a cutting. 3. Brendon teaching and sharing the art of bonsai with a fellow club member. 4. Part of the Japanese garden designed and constructed by Brendon at Kinben Bonsai Gardens – a place of contemplation.

“I’m big on getting involved in your local club. There are clubs around New Zealand, but not necessarily in every area. We’re lucky in Otago that we have many experienced members who are only too happy to offer advice to newbies. We have members who have been working on a tree for 40, 50 years!”

Lynn cautions that it’s not just a case of bunting a plant in a pot, and stresses that most bonsai should be kept outdoors. She also encourages people to keep a photographic record of their trees as a record of their progress over the years.

It’s best to start with a popular juniper, as they’re pretty forgiving, she says. In terms of local species, kōwhai, tōtara, coprosma, corokia, beech, rātā and pōhutukawa are good to try. However, she advises to avoid kānuka and mānuka, as they don’t like root disturbance.

“We have to keep in mind in New Zealand,” says Lynn, “that, being a long, skinny country, the climate varies from one end to the other. We have trees down here like larches, which are popular, but ficus are something we struggle with, whereas up in Auckland, ficus and other subtropicals are great to work on – but Aucklanders would struggle with larches. That’s a good reason to get in touch with your local society, because then you discover what your area has seen success with growing, and also the time of year to be doing things.”

Lynn agrees with Brendon that interest in bonsai is growing, and says the New Zealand Bonsai Association has 19 affiliated clubs.

“There’re people who do it as a hobby and other people who take it more seriously, so as a craft it can cater to all levels of people for what they want to achieve.”

To find a bonsai club or society near you, visit the New Zealand Bonsai Association website (bonsainz.com). You can also check out the Auckland Bonsai Society (sites.google.com/site/aucklandbonsaisociety) or the Otago Bonsai Society (otagobonsai.co.nz) direct.



Gretchen Carroll lives in Tāmaki Makaurau. She loves good books and coffee, and getting into nature. gretchen Carroll.journoportfolio.com