

Bonsai - For Christmas?

Jim Lewis*

Sunday, Dec. 8, 2002

Knowing that I grow bonsai, people often ask about giving someone a little tree for Christmas. But often, the *worst* thing you can give a friend as a Holiday gift is an already potted and designed bonsai. And you should *never* surprise someone with a tiny tree if that someone has never grown a bonsai -- or worse, has never grown anything.

Why such a hard-line against bonsai for the gift-giving season? Sad experience. I am a member of the Internet Bonsai Club (IBC -- a worldwide Internet discussion group devoted to tiny trees in pots). Without fail, a few weeks to a month after the Holidays, we get questions from clueless recipients of new bonsai about withered leaves or brown needles.



Almost always, these are first trees. Too often, it was their first potted plant! And with rare exception, there was little we could do for them; they had waited too long to send us their cry for help.

Usually, what they'd been given were mass-produced bonsai (often a small juniper) shipped to shopping mall garden centers in semi-trailer loads, or ordered from the Internet, or from catalogs. A diagnostic mark of these mass-produced bonsai is that the surface of the pot is covered with pebbles or other stones *that are glued on*. This makes watering difficult. On the IBC we call these "*Mallsai*."

Usually, it isn't the new owner's fault that their bonsai dies; the trees they were given were dead upon arrival at the store or at the giver's home -- from improper watering (the glued-on stones); shipping (the long, dark, dry trip from where they were potted); or simply inept potting to begin with. Especially with needled evergreens like juniper, it's hard to tell when the sap stops flowing; remember how your *cut* Christmas tree stays green weeks, or even months after it is harvested.

An exception to the warning about bonsai as gifts is if the tree is from a local merchant who pots up his own trees and who can help the new owner with problems. However, many local merchants also advise against buying someone a tree if that someone is new to bonsai.

So what do you do if you're being pestered by someone who wants a bonsai?

Buy them a book on bonsai, and a gift certificate to one of our local nurseries. They can read the book, enjoy pictures of decent bonsai made from many different species of trees or shrubs, then they can visit the nursery, find a bonsai pot and choose a plant to make their own little

Bonsai

tree. Look for a long list of worthwhile bonsai books at the IBC web site --
<http://www.internetbonsaiclub.org/>. (Scroll to "FAQ" then to "books and magazines")

I also suggest a gift membership in the Tallahassee Bonsai Society. The group meets the second Sunday of every month at the Lemoyne Art Gallery Annex on Call Street. There is a "Beginner's Corner" at 1:30 p.m., and the regular meeting is at 2:00 p.m. Annual dues are \$25. Write for information:

Tallahassee Bonsai Society,
P.O. Box 3652
Tallahassee, FL 32315-3652

They also can join us on the IBC. Send e-mail to bonsai-request@home.ease.lsoft.com. It's free, but nothing beats belonging to a local club.

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Photo by Jim Lewis: Large Bonsai Juniper at the U.S. National Arboretum, Washington, D.C.

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