

Bonsai FAQ's for the Marin County Fair

- How do you know how old the trees are?
 - We can guess their age by the size of the trunk mostly, and other features that indicate advanced age like thick and textured bark and the size of larger branches. The only way to know for sure is to cut a cross section through the trunk and count the rings, which of course we don't do.
- Which is the oldest tree?
 - It will depend on which trees are being exhibited, but usually the California Junipers are the oldest at 100 + years. They can be this old and still be small enough to be bonsai because of the slow growth in the harsh conditions in the High Sierra. These are collected trees.
- Are the trees passed down through families?
 - Not usually in this country, but there are some bonsai families in Japan which have trees from many generations. Here we pass the trees along to new custodians through sales, club auctions and gifts to bonsai gardens like the one in Oakland at Lake Merritt.
- How do you keep the trees so small?
 - By root, branch and leaf pruning mostly. Keeping them in small pots makes them grow more slowly.
- Where do you keep the trees?
 - Outside! Only some tropical species will thrive inside and those are usually kept in a well lighted area in the house. In really cold climates they may be brought into cold storage for protection. Otherwise outside all the time.
- Is the fruit edible and will it get to be normal size?
 - Yes, the fruit will get to be normal size if left on the tree and it is usually tasty. Most owners will take the fruit off after a show because the fruit directs growth away from other areas like branch development which are more important to most bonsai artists.
- Where do you get bonsai? Are they grown from seed?
 - Most bonsai artists don't take the time to grow from seed. Bonsai and pre-bonsai can be bought from a few local bonsai nurseries, regular nurseries, club auctions and sales and won at raffles at bonsai demonstrations. Some species can be propagated by air layering, or collected from the wild with permission.

- How do you keep the leaves so small?
 - Some trees are defoliated during the growing months to make the leaf size proportional for show, or to direct growth in the tree to certain areas.
- Can any tree be a bonsai?
 - A wide variety of trees can be bonsai. The most successful bonsai are created with trees that have smaller leaves and can handle the climate you live in. Faster growing trees are more satisfying to work with for beginners; olives, maples, pyracantha, cotoneaster, oaks etc.
- Why are there dead branches?
 - These are left on the trees and often carved and highlighted with a lightening solution to simulate deadwood you would see on a tree in nature. This is done to enhance the illusion of advanced age.
- Why is there wire on the branches?
 - This is to direct the growth where we want it. Usually some wiring is necessary on a tree to move the branch in the direction desired. Some trees can be more 'clip and grow' requiring little wire to develop into a nice shape.
- How much are the trees worth?
 - This is an impossible question to answer because there are so many factors; age, condition, rarity, the pot the tree is in, and the owner's ego.