

## Conifer Bonsai

Conifers, resilient to winter weather and known for producing cones, are slow-growing evergreen trees like Japanese Black Pine, Japanese White Pine, Shimpaku Juniper (including other juniper species), Spruce, Cypress, Larch, and various others. These types are ideal choices for creating beautiful outdoor bonsai.



### Water

There is no universal watering schedule that suits all bonsai trees. Bonsai plants can dehydrate rapidly due to their placement in coarse soil and shallow containers. Depending on factors such as tree species, pot size, soil type, climate, and more, the frequency of watering can vary. To determine if your bonsai needs water, check the soil moisture by inserting your finger about half an inch into the soil. If the top half inch feels dry, it is time to water.

When watering, ensure thorough soaking by either allowing the bonsai to absorb water through the drainage holes in the sink or showering it from above until the water drains out adequately. Avoid letting the soil completely dry out or remain excessively wet. Base your watering routine on the soil's moisture level; if uncertain, conduct periodic checks by soaking the bonsai and monitoring how the soil dries over time.

Regularly inspect the bonsai for moisture levels, especially on hot, windy days or if it is confined in a small pot. If any part of the soil feels dry, water that specific area. It is crucial to prevent the bonsai from becoming excessively dry by maintaining adequate moisture levels at all times.



### Light

The majority of conifers can withstand and often thrive in direct sunlight, particularly Pine and Juniper species. While Cypress and Cedars may not be as fond of intense sunlight, they still require ample outdoor light exposure to thrive.



Optimal airflow promotes the growth of cells. Ensure your conifer bonsai is constantly placed in a well-ventilated location, as this is crucial for its development.



When your bonsai begins to produce fresh, light-green growth, it is time to initiate feeding. Use a gentle organic fertilizer, either in pellet or liquid form, typically containing equal parts of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK) during the growing season, with reduced nitrogen levels in the fall. Apply the pellets around once a month and the liquid fertilizer every two weeks. As the tree's growth slows down in mid to late summer, you can decrease the liquid fertilizer frequency to once a month. During the bonsai's winter dormancy period, feeding is unnecessary. Remember, never fertilize a bonsai that is already weak.



Most conifers are suitable for outdoor bonsai cultivation and are not well-suited for indoor growth. It is recommended to place them outside on a porch, deck, or bench throughout spring, fall, and even into winter. The duration they can stay outside is influenced by temperature. An acclimated conifer bonsai can endure freezing temperatures and even slightly below freezing. In regions like New England, winter-hardy trees are typically kept outside during spring and summer and brought indoors for protection around the third week of November when nightly temperatures consistently reach freezing. Ideally, place your conifer bonsai in a sheltered area maintaining temperatures between 25° and 45°F with good air circulation and some light, such as a garage, unheated room, or cold frame. Avoid drastic temperature fluctuations. Regular watering is essential, although bonsai require less water during dormancy. Check the moisture level and water when the soil is dry, ensuring thorough soaking. Light is less critical during dormancy since the tree is not actively growing, but some small bonsai can be placed on a cold windowsill. Avoid proximity to heat sources. Some enthusiasts opt to overwinter hardy bonsai by burying them in a protected location, which carries some risk. Success depends on the tree's health, inherent

hardiness, local climate, and other factors. Monitor winter-hardy bonsai closely; if new growth emerges in late winter or early spring, they may require more sunlight than their winter storage area provides, resulting in smaller, sturdier leaves or needles. When temperatures consistently rise above freezing, return the conifer bonsai outdoors. In case of an unexpected cold night with temperatures below 32°F, bring the bonsai indoors for that night.



### **Cleanliness**

Towards the end of summer, it is common for conifers to naturally shed interior needles. Be sure to tidy up these yellow and brown needles from your bonsai. If any yellow needles remain attached to the branches and trunk, allow them to fall off easily on their own. Before storing the bonsai for winter, ensure to thoroughly remove all dead needles from the tree and the soil surface.



### **Pests & Diseases**

Conifers are resilient trees, but they can be susceptible to certain insects and diseases. Keep an eye out for scale insects, which are small sucking pests resembling tiny helmets. Remove these insects manually and then apply a gentle insecticidal soap or rotenone pyrethrin spray to the foliage. Only act against insects if you confirm an infestation.

For caterpillars or larger insects, simply pluck them off by hand. If your conifer is affected by a fungus, spray the foliage with a mild fungicide like liquid copper. Avoid spraying fungicide on the soil. If you suspect any issues with your bonsai tree, please contact us immediately.



### **Repotting**

The frequency of repotting varies depending on factors such as the tree's size, age, root condition, and other considerations. Older trees or those in larger pots may require repotting every two to four years, while younger conifers or those in smaller pots may need repotting annually.

The optimal time to repot conifers is when they begin to produce new buds in the spring. This timing can differ between individual trees and from one season to

another. Repotting is a crucial process that typically involves root pruning and must be carried out correctly. Assistance with this task is available from us. Additionally, you can attend a workshop, seek advice from a reputable bonsai enthusiast or club, or refer to a reliable bonsai book for guidance.



### **Pruning & Shaping**

According to our bonsai colleague and expert, Mr. Masaru Ishii, when it comes to conifers, the rule is 'No poodle cut, no barbershop cut.' This guideline emphasizes that you should avoid shearing the tops of conifers. While it is permissible to trim needles directly from the branch, when shortening or thinning a branch, it is essential to remove each individual bud or cluster of buds.

To remove new buds, you can either pinch them out using your thumb and forefinger or carefully cut them with sharp bonsai shears. For guidance on the correct technique and timing for pinching and plucking needles, it is advisable to seek advice from a bonsai professional.



### **Desiring & Styling**

The most exceptional and aesthetically pleasing bonsai trees are those that appear natural. By studying mature trees in their native habitats, you can sense their unique character and resilience. This natural look is the pinnacle of bonsai artistry that we aim to achieve.

Conifers lend themselves well to a variety of bonsai styles, ranging from formal upright to full cascade. Japanese White Pines, for instance, excel as informal upright bonsai, while certain cedar and cypress varieties are more suitable for formal upright styles. By observing how these trees grow in their natural surroundings, you can appreciate them in their most authentic and exquisite form.

Traditionally, conifers are planted in unglazed containers. The earthy tones of these pots complement the browns and reds of the bark, as well as the rich, deep green of the foliage, enhancing the overall visual appeal of the bonsai tree.