

Bonsai Houseplants...

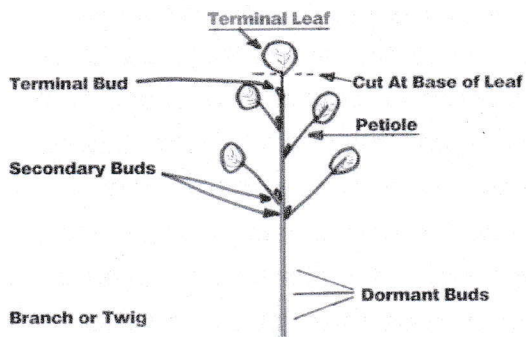
...Are easy for anyone with a good window, as long as you choose the right candidate. The best prospects for a bonsai novice, or anyone who wants a houseplant that looks like a bonsai is a Fig. There are many different looking figs and they all make great houseplants because they are hard to kill by over-watering or under-watering, the second most common problem causing houseplant demise. The most common problem is choosing a plant that needs conditions not available in a given household, like high light or very sensitive moisture requirements. Juniper bonsai, available everywhere, is not an indoor plant, and is an example of a plant that needs a quiet period, or dormancy, and is almost bulletproof as an outdoor tree that you set on the ground and mulch with dry leaves to the top of the pot in October, go to Florida, and come back the following April brush away the leaves and that's all the care it needs in winter. Bring it in the house in October and it'll be dead by Christmas.

There are ten varieties of Fig (*Ficus*) in this display; Burtt Davyi, Green Island, Willowleaf, Green Mound, Oriental, Tigerbark, Golden and Variegated Benjamina, Dwarf Pandora and Variegated Too Little. There are thousands more available in the trade. You choose the leaf shape, size and color you like. Most displayed here need a table; two fit on a typical windowsill.

You need one good window for a winter home; put your face where the plant would set, literally. Look out the window and characterize what is there: how much blue sky do you see? If you live on a farm or golf course and there is nothing obscuring the horizon, you have 100% sky. Subtract 10% for a 24" roof overhang, or 25% for a 36" overhang. For all other objects; house, trees, shrubs, etc., subtract that percentage of the sky that they obscure. Objects more than 100 feet away don't count. For apartment dwellers, the higher up you are, the better. You need a score of about 40% for south, 50% for east or west, or 60 to 75% for a north window to count as "good". You **CAN** have a successful Fig with less light, but there is a linear relationship between good light and good looking plants. The trees will not actually grow during winter; they will just "park". **DO NOT** rotate the plant to give all sides some better exposure. The leaves will adjust to the light they have. The window side leaves will be ~happy~ with what they have and the interior-facing leaves will adapt to less light (less than the window side leaves). If you rotate the plant, it will drop leaves every time you do so. Pick one side to look at all winter and leave it there. Do not feed your tree in the winter, water only when the soil is dry to the touch with your finger. Houses are very dry (to plants), so they need regular watering. They will use a predictable amount of water and need to cycle between wet, dry, wet, dry, etc., to stay healthy. Too much, or too little will result in dropped leaves. Use a dedicated container that is about 15 to 20% of the size of the bonsai pot and water on a schedule you can remember, like any calendar day divisible by 3, or 4, or 5. Test this schedule to see if the soil is dry to the touch. Smaller pots will require a smaller amount of water, but more often, and larger pots more water, but less often. It sounds more complex than it really is. Once you figure it out, it's forever.

As with most tropical trees the leaves last longer than one year, but not much longer. If you want the tree to look good all winter, you need to refresh the leaves every summer. You want the tree to enter autumn with leaves that will last longer than winter. You also want to keep the leaves small, -smaller than the natural size. You accomplish both outcomes as follows:

Summertime: Renewing the Tree: Grow a New Set of Leaves!



In May, when the overnight temperatures reach 50 degrees, cut all the leaves off at the **base** of the leaf, leaving the petiole connected to the twig or branch. The tree will look like a porcupine. There is a tiny bud in the axil of the petiole where it originates/joins the branch or twig. **DO NOT** damage the bud. The bud will kick the dry, ugly petiole out of the way as it expands and a new twig or set of leaves emerges. After all leaves are cut off, you will prune for size and shape: Remove the

Terminal Bud from all twigs to maintain size, ideally leaving four buds on a twig. Leave the Terminal Bud on any branch that needs to be longer. To reduce the size of the tree, leave only two buds on a twig. All these bud removals will make the tree more dense, -growing leaves closer to the trunk on all branches. Place the tree in full sun and water any day it doesn't rain. Ideally, the tree will be wet all day in the full sun and drier overnight. When all new leaves are mature (stop expanding), in ~about one month, it's time to repot:

Repotting To Keep the Tree Growing, Healthy, and Small

There is about the same amount of root growth as there is leaf growth. When the tree becomes pot-bound it will drop dead. Think of it in these terms: the growing medium is food for the roots, and a place in which to grow. When there is no room to grow, **AND** nothing to eat, the life process ends. Forcing a new set of leaves to grow every year uses resources which the tree will try to replace. You make room in the pot, or use a larger pot when necessary, for root growth at the same time you reduce the size of the rootball. There are two kinds (sizes) of roots: large anchor roots, and tiny, hair-like feeder roots. We remove as many anchor roots as we don't need (some are needed to wire the tree into the pot), and keep as many feeder roots as practical. The pot should have about ~40% rich bonsai mix/soil for one year's growth. Do this in the 3rd week of June when the tree has a whole new set of leaves (when they stop enlarging). Change pot size as necessary to keep the volume-to-tree relationship logical. Dig roots, and the whole tree will use whatever size is available, so if you want the tree to grow big, just keep potting up-sized and you'll get your wish.

With all new leaves and a pot full of new soil begin feeding the tree every two weeks with any commercial equivalent of Miracle Grow at full strength. Water thoroughly with a hose the whole pot mass when it is outdoors. Spray the foliage, too. In mid September, put the tree in a shady place where it gets light, but no direct sun and stop feeding. The foliage needs to adjust to the lousy light levels in a house. After two weeks treat the plant with an insecticide **intended for indoor use**, spray the leaves and wet the entire pot mass. Any light horticultural oil will work. Always follow manufacturer's directions. Maintain the several clouds' shapes by pinching any terminal bud or leaf that sticks out beyond the imaginary canopy shape you want. For lower clouds: no leaves point straight down or grow up to touch the bottom of the cloud above; maintain horizontal "empty space". In all places, favor leafs that are horizontal verses vertical or odd-angled. Do this year-around. And, that's all there is to it! Welcome to bonsai!!