

Is it, or is
it not, bonsai?
And why?

A free mini-eBook about
Phony Bonsai
by Mary C. Miller

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by Mary C. Miller *aka* BonsaiMary

Many bonsai artists use words such as "phony," "pseudo" and "fake" to describe the plants shown in this e-book. Why? Because they don't look like old trees and have not followed the basic guidelines involved in the art of bonsai.

Many of these plants are very popular with novices unfamiliar with the techniques and concepts of bonsai. Sometimes the only thing that resembles actual bonsai is the pots they're grown in. *A bonsai pot does not make just any plant a bonsai.*

One of the main reasons for their popularity is, some make very good house plants.

Many species of plants are suited to bonsai.



Junipers are very popular subjects. The juniper shown here is a *true bonsai*. Well styled and maintained, this plant is always grown *outdoors*. Although the actual age of a bonsai is highly respected, the *appearance* of age is always a desirable.

Pony Tail Palm



The pony tail palm (*Beaucarnea sp.*) native to Mexico, is a perfect house plant and it looks good in a bonsai pot.

Common names can be confusing, *it is not a palm*. In nature, it grows in full sun. However, it tolerates lower light than many plants indoors.

It does not like to be soaking wet and prefers to dry out fully between watering.

After a few years in a pot, it needs to either have its roots trimmed or it can be stepped up to a larger pot. I grew one indoors for many years. *It is not a bonsai*.

When I moved to a home with over an acre of property, my little pony tail houseplant moved with us. I eventually planted it in the landscape, it grew quickly.

(At the time we lived in South Florida.)

After moving it from one area of the property to another several times, my son Tom said “*Mom, pick a spot, it’s getting too heavy to move again!*” I did.

In the ground it became very tall.

One year, I decided to shorten it and removed *all the top growth*, to encourage a new top.

Despite my neighbors' fears that I had killed it, because it had no leaves, within a few months the leaves had come back ten times over.

It slowly sprouted new growth. I was then rewarded with multiple "heads."



Today, it is at least 40 years old.

The *Beaucarnea* is a blooming plant. Under the right circumstances, it gets spikes of white flowers

Botanically speaking it is not a tree, not a palm and not (as many report) in the lily family.

It is in the family *Asparagaceae*.

Cutting the top out of your pony tail will not kill it.

If it is in good light, even indoors, it will develop new growth the same as this old beauty did!

Lucky Bamboo



'Lucky bamboo' may look like bamboo, but it is not. It is not even in the *Bambusa* family, it is a *Dracaena sanderiana*.

The majority of those sold today are novelties with weaves, twists and braids, often growing in water.

They will survive longer if transplanted into potting soil and should be in a pot with holes in the bottom for good drainage.

It, like the pony tail palm looks good in a bonsai pot and is often planted that way. Still not a bonsai.

Lucky bamboo, although native to Africa, is usually imported from China and Taiwan, and does not follow any of the basic concepts of bonsai.

If this plant becomes too tall, it can easily tip over in a small pot. There is no problem with trimming the top growth.

Heavenly Bamboo



Some consider the segmented stems of older *Nandina domestica* plants to resemble bamboo. Therefore, it is so named.

From time to time you may see this plant in a bonsai pot used as a companion plant at bonsai exhibits.

However, it is *not considered a true bonsai*.

Although this plant will grow indoors, it needs very high light.

Sago Palm (*Cycas revoluta*)



John Naka, famed bonsai artist, included the sago palm in his book (*Bonsai Techniques II*) and said:

“... called sago palm, but it is not a palm. It is a cycad and is native of Japan. Not a true bonsai, but it can be used as a secondary plant.”

He spoke of planting a tall cycad on a slant to create a curve, shaping leaves, planting them in clusters, and even *“driving a spike to hold them together”* in a group.

Drawing by John Naka



Cycad (Sago) on Pinterest posted by Prasit Tangjitrapitak, Thailand

The 'Money Tree' - *Pachira aquatica*



This tree is often recommended for use in Feng Shui and as a gift for good luck.

When it is small, this plant is sometimes sold as "bonsai."

When placed in good potting soil and a bigger pot, it is a perfect houseplant and will grow tall indoors in good light, with relatively few problems.

In its native sub-tropical and tropical climates, it grows up to 60 feet tall.

Today, with its popularity as the "Money Tree," it plays an important role in Taiwan's agricultural export economy, with exports in the millions of dollars. Perhaps this is where it gets its nickname.

Its large leaves prevent it from becoming a true bonsai.



The *schefflera* leaf shown here, (similar to the Money Tree leaf) is *one leaf with many leaflets*.

There are techniques in bonsai to make a leaf smaller.

This is highly unlikely to work with such a large compound leaf.

"Instant Bonsai"



Novices are often attracted to cute, little, less stylized plants. (One reason may be, *they are priced much lower than the real thing!*)

In the professional bonsai world little junipers (as shown here) and other rooted plant cuttings in bonsai pots are often referred to as “mall trees.” They first became popular in mall booths especially around the holidays.

Today they show up everywhere, including online.

Why isn't it a bonsai?

This is a small rooted cutting of a juniper, called a “liner.” It has not been planted very long. This is what a branch cutting naturally looks like. It does not have any design or shaping and does not give the appearance of an old tree.

IF you have truthful care instructions, you may be able to keep it alive. (For example, understand that the *juniper is not a plant that likes to grow indoors!*)

What Should You Do With Your Phony Bonsai?

If you have one of the plants listed in this mini-eBook, maybe they are an ‘introduction to bonsai’ for you!

Enjoy your plants, just please don't call them bonsai!

Bonsai is a Japanese horticultural art form using techniques to create plants which *look like small, old trees growing in containers.*

Learn more on my www.BonsaiMary.com website