

# 4 HOW OLD IS IT? AGE IN BONSAI

## An Educational Partnership



Out of the many interesting aspects regarding the art of bonsai, the subject of age seems to attract the most attention. Many people believe all bonsai are of extreme old age and are surprised to learn that most are only a few years old.

It might be said that a bonsai has three ages – how old the plant is, how old it looks and how long it has been a bonsai. Some bonsai are truly old. Bonsai created from Yamadori can be hundreds of years old, but that is how old the plant is, not how long it has been a bonsai. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible to determine the exact age of old bonsai.

Many bonsai are made to look old as part of the bonsai creative process. How the appearance of age has been incorporated into the beauty of the bonsai is the important factor. Most bonsai have only been “styled and placed in a bonsai pot” for a few years. In fact, many of the bonsai you see have only been a “bonsai” for under fifty years and most, a good deal less than that. Some bonsai of true beauty and visual interest have been a bonsai for as few as three or four years.

The appearance or impression of age can be produced by the artist. Trunks can be bent and twisted to reflect a long life in a harsh environment. Branches can be “strategically” broken and “jined”. Shari can be created on sections of trunks to simulate the effects of die-back.

The proportion of trunk size in relationship to the size of the overall tree is exaggerated to give the miniature tree the impression of power and majesty of their full-sized counterparts. Branches are carefully arranged to enhance the view of the trunk and given the movement and mass that only comes with old age. Bark texture can be enhanced to give an appearance of age. Surface roots can be emphasized to provide the impression of a well-established tree firmly gripping the earth. “Deadwood” can be treated to replicate sun-bleaching in the high alpine or desert environments. Specialized tools can be used to “carve” deadwood to indicate, old age rot or windblown sand or insect damage. Torches can be used to replicate damage by fire. Trees planted in groups with trees of large and smaller trunks in groups to indicate differences in age and length of existence.

All of these “special effects” in bonsai are carefully planned and orchestrated to look totally spontaneous and natural. In the creation of a bonsai great care must be taken to ensure the presentation of the story the bonsai tells does not include evidence of the intervention of the artist’s hand.

In the words of the late John Naka, considered by many the father of American bonsai, “You are insulting the bonsai artist if you are only interested in the age of the tree and not it’s beauty, because it is not the age of the tree that is most important.”



[Link to video](#)

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### LEADING QUESTIONS

*Grades 3rd -5th*

#### KEY IDEAS & DETAILS

Explain what the importance of age is in a bonsai and tell which are the three ages of bonsai.

#### INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE & IDEAS

Explain why an artist would want to make a bonsai look older.

#### FLUENCY

Use the text to describe how you would create your own bonsai, talk about the techniques you would use.

*Grades 6th - 8th*

#### KEY IDEAS & DETAILS

Why would an artist be offended if you only asked how old the bonsai is? Cite textual evidence.

#### CRAFT & STRUCTURE

Define the words shari and jined then explain why they are used to make a bonsai.

#### TEXT TYPES & PURPOSE

In a well written paper support or counterargue the value of "aging" a tree.

*Grades 9th - 12th*

#### INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE & IDEAS

What are some other examples of how age is important in other art forms such as painting, sculpture, architecture?

#### RESEARCH TO BUILD & PRESENT KNOWLEDGE

When does age make something less valuable?

#### TEXT TYPES & PURPOSE

In the text there was a mention of the late John Naka as the father of American bonsai, infer what being the "father" of American bonsai means. Bring into your answer an example of another father figure in history and their contribution to their field.



### ADDITIONAL LESSON PLANS from GSBF-Clark Bonsai Collection

*From the Welcome to the Clark Bonsai Collection Series*

1. An Outdoor Museum (link to video)
  - An Outdoor Museum (link to document)
2. The Peace Tree Bonsai (link to video)
  - The Peace Tree Bonsai (link to document)
3. Yamadori & The Contribution of Japanese Americans to the Art of Bonsai (link to video)
  - Yamadori & The Contribution of Japanese Americans to the Art of Bonsai (link to document)

### ADDITIONAL LESSON PLANS from Shinzen Friendship Garden

*From the Welcome to the Shinzen Garden Series*

1. Design Concepts (link to video)
  - Design Concepts (link to document)
2. The 1939 Lantern (link to video)
  - The 1939 Lantern (link to document)
3. The Koi Pond (link to video)
  - The Koi Pond (link to document)
4. The Toro Nagashi Ceremony (link to video)
  - The Toro Nagashi Ceremony (link to document)

### ADDITIONAL LINKS TO JAPANESE CULTURE & GARDENS

Visit us at: <http://shinzenjapanesegarden.org>

1. Traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony (link to video)
2. Japanese Chado Matcha Green Tea Ceremony (link to video)
3. 45 Japanese Garden Design Ideas (link to video)
4. Portland Japanese Garden (link to website)
5. Oregon Koto-Kai Performances (link to website)
6. Green Legacy Hiroshima (link to website)
7. Hiroshima Peace Tree Planted in Clovis (link to website)

### ADDITIONAL LINKS TO GSBF BONSAI COLLECTIONS & BONSAI

Visit us at: <https://gsbfclarkbonsaicollection.org>

1. CBC\_Behind the Scene with Bob Hilvers, "John Naka – California Juniper" (link to video)
2. CBC\_Behind the Scene with Bob Hilvers, "The Dwarf Oak" (link to video)
3. CBC\_Behind the Scene with Bob Hilvers, "Basic Bonsai 01" (link to video)
4. CBC\_Behind the Scene with Bob Hilvers, "Basic Bonsai 02" (link to video)
5. CBC\_Behind the Scene with Bob Hilvers, "Basic Bonsai 03" (link to video)

