

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Succulent of the Month May 2003 - *Bonsai Succulents*

The two syllables of the Japanese word *bonsai* translate as a tree in a pot. Bonsai grew from an older Chinese art form, *penjing*, dating to before 200 BC, and brought to Japan during invasions in the 15th century. There are similar but less well known art forms in Korea and Viet Nam. There are schools and styles of Bonsai, that have evolved over centuries. These are well codified, and the types of trees and plantings are well defined. In spite of this apparent rigidity, Bonsai is very much an improvisational art, as can be seen at any demonstration by an advanced practitioner.



Euphorbia balsamifer shown by Rudy Lime in the 2001 CSSA Show

The classic Bonsai trees are Conifers and the deciduous trees of temperate climates. Bonsai succulents are usually planted to show the structural form of the trunk, caudex or roots of the plant. In almost all formal Bonsai styles, the taper of the trunk from the base through the branches is all important. Most succulents cannot be grown with this taper; they naturally constrict near the soil line. For this reason succulents are not accepted in Bonsai shows. However, for many years skilled Bonsai artists have applied their talents to Succulent plants, as

can be seen in any Southern California Show.

When first staging a Bonsai succulent, it's a good idea to study a Bonsai text. The text by Deborah Koreshoff, listed below, is one of the best at clearly explaining the reasoning behind choices in staging, pot selection, grooming and presentation.

An important part of Bonsai is matching the plant to the pot and the top dressing to provide an overall image. This part of the Bosai are has had the biggest influence on the appearance of all of the Southern California Cactus and Succulent Shows.



Fouquieria fasticulata shown by Rudy Lime in the 2001 CSSA Show

Pots and top dressing should be chosen to compliment the plants. Tall plants, where the height is being emphasized are often planted in pots with widths about two thirds of the plant height. If the horizontal spread of the caudex and branches are being emphasized, the pot should be about two thirds to three quarters of this dimension. The two pictures shown above are great demonstrations of the selection of pot size to emphasize the important characteristic of the plant.

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All the plants shown have superbly matched rock and top dressing. The rocks compliment the color of the caudex and trunk. In classical Bonsai, rocks are much less frequently used, and the rock surface tends to be old, smooth and weathered, typical of a wetland habitat instead of a desert.

Good plants for Succulent Bonsai include:

Adenia - all species
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Bombax ellipticum
Bursera - most species
Cissus tuberosa
Commiphora - some species
Crassula - some species
Cussonia - some species
Cyphostemma – almost all species
Euphorbia - some species
Ficus many succulent species
Fouquieria - all species
Ibervillea - some species
Ipomea - some species
Jatropha - most species
Mestoklema all species
Moringa species
Othonna - many species
Oxalis carnosus



Pachycormus discolor entered by Rudy Lime in the 2001 CSSA Show

Pachycormus discolor
Pachypodium - all species
Plectranthus Ernestii
Sarcocaulon
Sedum frutescens, oxypetalum
Trichodiadema bulbosum
Tylecodon species

References

C. Lewis & N. Sutherland **Bonsai**
D. Koreshoff **Bonsai, Its Art, Science History and Philosophy**
G. Rowley, **Caudiciforms and Pachycaul Succulents**

Tom Glavich April 2003
Photos by T. Nomer