

English elm bonsai

Growing bonsai from an established tree

by Max Lehey

Converting English elm (*Ulmus procera*) or any of the elm family from reasonably large trees, growing in the ground, to a bonsai is a relatively simple process. Elms, with a life expectancy of over 300 years, are extremely hardy trees that will stand hard pruning of the trunk, branches and roots without harm. A tree with a diameter of up to 10 cm can be dug up in winter, and then cut back to 30 cm in height. This can then be planted into a container of coarse gravel and will, in the spring, grow an entirely new set of roots and branches.

For this procedure, in southern climes, elms may be found growing along creeks or disused land where they tend to grow in root connected clumps. Elsewhere in Australia, old unwanted garden specimens or suckers from such specimens may be collected. Select only those trees with interesting unblemished bark and well balanced rootage.

In late winter the tree has to be cut off to its right height to commence training.

Note that to pot a tree with a trunk diameter of 10 cm, it should be cut off at double its width, (~20 cm); a 7.5 cm trunk – 2.5 times its width, (~19 cm); a 5 cm trunk – three times its width (~15 cm). This graduation of trunk size allows for development of proportionally correct trunks.

Be careful not to cut the tree too early in the winter as the top may dry out preventing new shoots coming from the cambium layer.

Firstly, saw the tree off at about 60 cm from the ground, taking care



Picture 1 – The crown of the elm showing radiating branches.

not to damage the bark. Using a sharp axe, cut through the roots at a distance of approximately 45 cm from the trunk.

Cut off any roots growing under the trunk before planting in the container using a sharp saw and cut the surface roots



Picture 2 – This elm is in its second year from cutting.

downwards and away from the trunk so that they will not be visible and so that they will be short enough to fit the eventual bonsai bowl and have a natural appearance.

Seal all major underground cuts with a wound sealant, then plant in a roomy container of rich gravelly soil. A medium sized green-grocer's polystyrene container is ideal.

In spring cut off any buds except those growing from the cambium. Allow these to grow a little then thin out leaving only about six radiating around the top. When these shoots reach 15 cm in height, bore a hole down the centre of the trunk about 2.5 cms in diameter and about 5 cm in depth.

With a small sharp saw, cut a 'V' between each little shoot down to the base of the hole, so that each little shoot is sitting on the top of a small pillar of wood (fig. 1).

Start with five pillars of wood; these may be cut back to three at a later date. Small holes can be drilled down the trunk at the base of each pillar to anchor the wire that will be used to shape the branch.

Do not cut the shoots this year as this will allow them to grow and produce new bark that will attach them firmly to the trunk.

The following year the shoots can be wired outwards to form the main branches of the tree, making sure the wire is well anchored to the pillar before wiring the shoot. Bend the branches outwards, nipping the ends to activate buds along, their length (pic 1).

These inside branches will form the head of the tree. Fertilise and pinch to get even growth all over the tree which has to be developed in the shape of a large ball. As the tree develops, pull the larger branches down to almost horizontal to the centre to develop (pic 2).

By the third year, the tree will not be looking so bare. Many of the shoots will be produced at the sides of the branches, giving a flat look. These have to be wired and manipulated until they are one over the top of the other. Wire all small branches and lead them into vacant




Picture 3 – This elm is about eight years from its operation and is now ready for a complete wiring and shaping.

spaces, allowing them to grow.

By the fourth year, during repotting, trim off any of the small roots then set the tree a little higher out of the soil exposing more rootage.

Some of branches by now will be starting to produce the twiggy end-growth. This can be encouraged by constant trimming of the buds during the growing season. Wiring of all branches is necessary to fill in any of the bare spots.

A dense round head will eventually develop of similar appearance to the well grown elms in the parks. The finished size of a bonsai with a 7.5 cm trunk would be a total height about 50 cm, and width also 50 cm (pic 3).

This method I have found to work and to work well. Why don't you give it a go; I am sure you will not only have similar successes, but also enjoy creating such a marvellous bonsai as much as I did. 

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