

# Tokyo Students Find Meaning Through Bonsai

**Bonsai, the cultivation of miniature potted trees, is an aesthetically beautiful, culturally important art for hobbyists of any age.**

Originating in China around 700 A.D., bonsai was introduced in Japan during the 12th-14th centuries and gradually became popularized nationwide, including in the capital.

At the Tokyo Metropolitan Engei (Horticultural) High School, founded in 1908, members of the bonsai club keep this precious historical art alive and thriving.

The high school houses two bonsai five-needle pine trees, once favored by former shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu. Said to pre-date the Edo period (1603–1868), with both trees being around 500 years old, the Nippon Bonsai Association designated them as valuable properties in 1999.

Three times a week after school, club members learn essential bonsai care techniques such as watering, fertilizing, pruning and potting.



Many types of trees can be used for bonsai, including hinoki (Japanese cypress), maple, and several varieties of pine.



From left: Yoshioka Riko, Yoshida Yuichi and Tanaka Rinna from the bonsai club at Tokyo Metropolitan Engei High School.

## Overcoming the Fear of Mistakes to Embrace the Joy of Bonsai Care

As they had minimal experience with bonsai prior to joining the club, the students said that the practice involved a steep learning curve. Despite bonsai's daunting nature, however, the students have persevered—therein discovering that pushing past the intimidation has yielded immense rewards.

Yoshioka Riko, one of the club members, previously believed that only master craftspeople could care for bonsai, but was pleasantly surprised to realize that not only could she do it as well, but that it was also great fun.

## Sharing the Love of Bonsai with Others While Respecting Its History

The students cited their experience as bonsai instructors at a local park workshop as playing a crucial role in building their confidence to practice the craft.

Seeing workshop participants expressing interest toward bonsai cultivation inspired their own continuing enthusiasm toward the art and desire to share it with others.

Tanaka Rinna says keeping this historic practice going is quite a responsibility, as some trees they care for are over 50 years old and can live up to 1,000 years. As each individual bonsai has its own personality, it is important to cut it in the direction it will likely grow best, so getting to know each tree is essential.

Although in Japan there is a common misconception that it is only a hobby for elderly people, the students show that it is for people of any age, and that they are the ones that must make sure bonsai reach future generations.



Members of the Tokyo Metropolitan Engei High School bonsai club.

## Bonsai as a Means for Deepening International Ties

According to the bonsai club students, the artistic practice also has an important role to play in encouraging international connections.

Yoshida Yuichi wants people around the world to experience the type of bonsai workshops the club organized in Tokyo. After high school he plans to travel to Norway for cycling and fishing, as well as backpacking around places such as India, the United States, and Europe—where he also hopes to teach people the art of bonsai.

Other club members want to use social media to introduce bonsai to overseas audiences through evocative photos and videos, while another hopes to see entities such as companies and art museums spearhead bonsai-themed events to help spread interest in the art, both domestically and internationally.

Wise beyond their years, the high school students have found that working with the plants can also help inspire a more natural approach to life. "I now find myself encouraging my friends to put down their phones and instead reach for a bonsai to take care of," says Yoshida. "Amidst today's digitalized society, I hope that people can find balance in their lives by learning the slow art of bonsai care."



From left: Yoshida, Tanaka and Yoshioka carefully prune their trees using the knowledge for bonsai care gained through their club lessons.



Operating on the concept that envisions green urban development for the next 100 years, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government is pushing initiatives to protect, cultivate, and utilize Tokyo's greenery.