# Sources of Bonsai Material

“Material” refers to living trees that can be used as the starting point for a bonsai.

What makes good material

* Bonsai-friendly species.
* Mature tree… or at least reasonably thick and with good nebari (root flare)
* No irrepairable defects that would drag down the final bonsai’s authenticity.
* Not too expensive!

At what stage of life to acquire material

* As **seed**: This is the slowest and most failure-prone option – usually not worth the time unless you’re considering going commercial. In particular, “grow your bonsai from seed” kits are not a good purchase or gift!
* As **seedling**: Can be a cheap way of exploring different bonsai styling options, of trying out more expensive species (e.g. Japanese maples) without breaking the bank, or of playing with miniature (“shito”) bonsai.
* As **sapling** or semi-mature non-bonsai tree: Wide range of sources, but may take several years before it really resembles a finished bonsai. The tree may already have grown in unwanted directions, but can typically be forced back into a more compact shape over time.
* As **trained**[[1]](#footnote-1) (but unrefined) bonsai: A good balance between cost and development time. We can largely leave the style and outline as-is (unless we want to change it up) and focus on branch ramification.
* As **refined** bonsai: The easiest but most expensive option. A well-ramified bonsai, which has adapted to a small pot and inorganic soil, will not grow vigorously and just needs to be maintained.
* Most bonsai enthusiasts have a part-refined bonsai or two, to remind them what the end goal looks like, and a wider pool of bonsai in training to practice on.

Where to acquire untrained / part-trained material

### From bonsai specialists / nurseries

* Generally the most expensive option due to higher labour costs, especially if the specialist is recognised outside the bonsai community.
* Also generally the highest-quality option: less risk of irrepairable defects, and more focus given to the root ball.
* Bonsai trade shows and exhibitions can sometimes offer better prices; the downside is a reduced stock range.
* Many bonsai enthusiasts aim to sell on a proportion of their collection each year to make room for new trees. It’s worth making contact with these people, e.g. through a bonsai club.

### From generalist garden centres / nurseries

* Generally *relatively* cheap. Often a broad range of species available.
* You still pay a premium for more mature specimens with thicker trunks.
* Often have irrepairable defects: obvious grafts, reverse taper, tool marks, etc. These may not always be obvious until you’ve bought the tree and dug down to the nebari!
* Often a lot of annoyances: hard-to-cut soil (esp. tightly-packed high-coir composts), shoddy slip-potting, pot-binding, girdling roots, etc.
* Large material can be a pain in the neck to transport if you’re limited to public transport, although many nurseries will deliver.
* Consider taking a pair of branch shears with you to the supplier’s location if expecting to buy a particularly sprawling specimen!

## From self-seeded locations

* Mature trees are perfectly capable of seeding themselves in a range of locations, including poorly tended flowerbeds where the seedlings function as weeds. They can be quite hard to remove at the root, so gardeners often just cut them back to ground level… which lets them re-grow later. Some rogue trees can persist for decades.
* Self-seeded trees can be a useful source of free material. The range of choices is typically limited, and restricted to local “outdoor” species. However, trees that have been cut back over several years are effectively already part-trained bonsai!
* A common location to find self-seeded trees is council and estate flower-beds, since most councils and housing associations, especially in poorer areas, have a very limited budget for gardening services. Removing self-seeded trees from these beds is essentially a form of guerilla gardening.
* As with all guerilla gardening, this activity is technically illegal: under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is unlawful to uproot any wild plant without permission from the landowner or occupier. However, the author is not aware of anyone ever being prosecuted for weeding a council bed; the main obstacle to it being endorsed by councils appears to be health-and-safety concerns.
* Be careful only to take clearly unwanted trees – those that:
  + Are growing in undesirable locations, such as right up next to a pavement, building, or mature tree.
  + Are of species that readily self-seed in the area, for example because there are several mature trees.
  + Ideally are younger than typical council-planted saplings or have visibly been cut back to ground level by gardeners.
  + Aren’t growing in an area where additional cover is helpful or gaps are undesirable, such as a hedge.
* Another common source is private land, including agricultural land, privately-owned woodland and personal gardens. In these locations, there is a much greater risk that someone will *want* the tree you’re about to remove, so as a matter of ethics you should always seek to get permission first.
* Whatever your source, it is important to leave the area in at least as good a state as you found it. Clean up after yourself carefully!
* At one point in the past, it was considered acceptable to remove trees from public land, including “natural bonsai” (“yamadori”, meaning “mountain-gathered”) from cliffs, crevices and other marginal areas. This is now completely – and justifiably – illegal: trees on public land are there to be enjoyed by the public, not lost into private collections.

## Some major UK bonsai nurseries

* [The Bonsai Shed](https://thebonsaished.com/) (Surrey) run by Andy Barber. Accessible from London. Hosts an annual bonsai car boot sale in August.
* [Herons Bonsai](https://www.herons.co.uk/) (Surrey) run by Peter Chan. Has won many awards… but, as a result, is Exhibit A for popularity-induced overpricing.
  + Peter is probably the most controversial figure in UK bonsai community: he has written some popular books and has a well-followed Youtube channel, but is also widely criticised. He is informally banned from one club for ripping a bonsai out of its pot without unwiring it first during a demonstration.
  + The author believes that this is at least partly because he focuses on bonsai in the training stage, when drastic interventions are commonplace, which makes him look like a cowboy to most bonsai club members who focus on refining mature bonsai. In the author’s opinion, his books and channel are perfectly acceptable sources for beginning hobbyists.
  + The nursery is located close to London but is completely inaccessible by public transport.
* [LV Bonsai](https://www.lvbonsai.co.uk/) (Kent) run by Lee Verhoeven.
* [Greenwood Bonsai Studio](https://www.bonsai.co.uk/) (Nottingham) run by Corin Tomlinson. Also has a [Youtube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCz_vX75GG3NFKiyLzwmHxtA).
* A more complete list can be found on the [UK Bonsai Association website](https://www.ukbonsaiassoc.org/traders-suppliers.html).

## Some non-specialist suppliers in range of Kennington

* [Walworth Garden](https://walworthgarden.org.uk/)! A charitable trust with high ethical standards, at the cost of somewhat higher prices. Good source of broadleaf trees and shrubs.
* [PlantSocietree](https://www.plantsocietree.com/) (Walworth Road). Good source of coniferous trees and indoor species, as well as bonsai pots and specialist bonsai tools. Owner Ian is a bonsai hobbyist.
* [Travel Café](https://www.travel.cafe/) (near Lambeth North). Focused mostly on consumer-grade “nonsai” rather than well-trained bonsai, but a good source of interesting indoor species.
* [B&Q Peckham](https://www.diy.com/store/1037). Good source of cheap outdoor trees. Be wary of pests: the author found vine weevil in one pot.
* [Woodland Trust](https://woodlandtrust.org.uk/) (online [shop](https://shop.woodlandtrust.org.uk/single-trees) only). Great source of British-native tree seedlings at low prices.

## Common self-seeded species around London

* Tree of Heaven (Ailanthus altissima) – hugely invasive, grows well in broken ground such as building sites.
* Ash (Fraxinus excelsior).
* Maple (Acer): sycamore (A. pseudoplatanus), Norwegian (A. platanoides), field (A. campestre). More exotic maple species tend not to propagate so easily, so even small specimens are not likely to be self-seeded, although I have seen self-seeded red maple (A. Rubrum).
* Horse chestnut (Aesculus hippocastanum). Not typically bonsai’d due to large leaves, but fine for practicing techniques on. I find it tends to be sensitive to tap root loss.
* Oak (Quercus): pedunculate (Q. robur), holm (Q. ilex).
* Buddleia – but be careful as this is frequently grown as an ornamental species!
* London Lime (Tilia x europaea).
* Common beech (Fagus sylvatica).

1. Often referred to as “field grown”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)