

## Chinese Privet as Bonsai

by Zach Smith

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Since it is so prolific and vigorous, many perhaps think of privet as not worthy of treatment as bonsai. I feel this is an unfortunate attitude because it has so many desirable features, including leaves, flowers and fruit in scale. Privet is also pest-free and pollution and drought resistant.

Although there is some disagreement among authorities, it seems clear that our local privet, planted extensively in Southern landscapes and now escaped from cultivation, is *Ligustrum sinense*, the Chinese privet. (Escaped is the perfect term for this plant - it re-seeds with sometimes frightening rapidity and grows like a weed in fields and along highways and fencerows in my area, with only man's attempts to control it keeping the peace.)

It is Chinese privet that I write about when I say that among the forty or so species of trees and shrubs I have grown as bonsai, it would be hard to name one better suited than privet. It adapts well to pot culture and takes most any degree of top and root pruning without a whimper. Privet has no definite growing season, starting to bud in early spring and growing until it is simply too cold for further growth. Constant pinching and pruning throughout the season will not seriously retard its growth. Midsummer repotting, with minimal precautions, will not harm it. I have almost never had a cutting fail to root. My collecting efforts have turned up specimens growing in hardpan as well as loose, sandy soil. In short, privet does not present a horticultural challenge. This makes it ideal for beginners, who are most interested in mastering the challenges of bonsai training without having to worry if the plant will die from some mysterious cause.

If privet is native to your area, consider collecting a few specimens. In my locale it can be found in cattle pens, which means it comes partially trained. (There is limited availability in commercial nurseries.) Privet may be dug at any time of year, but it is advisable when collecting in midsummer to defoliate or cover with a clear dry-cleaner's bag for two weeks or so. Although it is most likely to be found growing in a clump and may be trained in that style, I usually eliminate all but one or two trunks. Privet is not particular as to soil, but of course good bonsai practice is to be sure that drainage is excellent.

### **How it grows . . . and grows**

The basic growth habit of privet is the same as for most hedging shrubs - a naturally rounded form which produces elongated shoots up to several feet long during the growth season; it does not display apical dominance. Shearing will result in the bushy, compact growth typical of hedges. Its vigorous nature is one of the desirable features of privet, as it allows you to grow a new apex or branches with great speed. Planted in the ground, a privet seedling an eighth-inch thick left alone can easily grow to a trunk thickness of three-fourths inch by fall. Since it grows constantly throughout the season, mistakes are easily corrected. Removing all of the branches from privet will result in a profusion of trunk buds, which allows you to choose branches to suit whatever design goal you have. When the shoots grow out in a couple of weeks, pick what you like. Should you lose an important branch for whatever reason, it is a simple matter to encourage new trunk buds by a semi-hard pruning (which allows you to maintain the rest of your design). Fortunately, privet's growth rate will slow somewhat in a bonsai pot, particularly in older plants.

### **Training (taming)**

Training a privet is quite simple. Due to its rapid growth rate and prolific trunk-budding, privet is one of the native (naturalized) American species suited to the "grow and clip" technique. This allows you to forgo wiring virtually altogether, and the benefit is seeing your design take shape within the space of one year. Privet shoots sometimes grow upward, so as you begin your work on shoots selected for branches you

may have to use wire to convince them to lay more horizontally. Once this is done (usually just three or four weeks is sufficient) you can remove the wire and stick with the scissors. Remember as you work on side branches that your goal is to restrain the tree's vigor; this means you should avoid cutting to top-pointing buds. I prefer to think of privet training as taming; in fact, you may find keeping your developing bonsai in check to be somewhat frustrating.

Of course, you need not feel obligated to practice "grow and clip" with privet. Let it grow, trim and wire it to shape, and pinch and prune to develop your design. Wiring is possible at all times of the year. Young branches are especially supple, making them easy to bend however you like, but at the same time they take their new shape quickly and do not seem to have much shape "memory." I recommend being especially careful to avoid girdling due to the fast growth rate. If you wire in spring, you can expect to have trouble, sometimes seemingly overnight, by late July (in the south). When you wire, you must be careful of privet's bark, which is very tender. I have used wrapped and plastic-coated wire, but frankly find that just being a little extra careful with uncoated wire is sufficient to prevent damage. Spring wiring, when the new surge of sap is underway, tends to cause more bark damage than that done in summer or fall. Once your privet bonsai has been developed, keeping it under control will be your main goal - or problem. You will be grateful that not all of the species in your collection grow like the privet. During the warmer months of the growing season, you may find yourself pinching new growth as often as every few days. There will be new buds in the leaf axils surprisingly quickly, and these will become shoots almost overnight. Though this can be annoying, keep in mind that privet bonsai reach refinement stage very quickly, so you will feel satisfaction at your achievement with privet sooner than with many other species. The price you pay is eternal vigilance.

I also recommend an occasional semi-hard to hard pruning, simply to thin out your bonsai. You will find that in due course privet will give you extremely dense foliage pads, even denser than what is desirable.

### **Root Pruning**

Privet should be root-pruned no less often than every year. Semi-annual root-pruning, once in early spring and again in early fall, is advisable for young plants. I typically bare-root privet when repotting, which allows me to completely examine the root and overall health. Privet sprouts new roots quite readily, so if you do not like the distribution, it is easy to prune them pretty drastically and encourage new ones to grow. You prune back the root system with sharp bonsai shears to make a compact ball, flattened on the bottom. Unlike other species, wherein you might remove up to a third of the roots, I recommend removing half of the roots for privet, since they will regenerate so quickly. Repot the tree using fresh, well-drained bonsai soil, water thoroughly and place in the shade for a week or so. Should you have to repot in warmer weather, and find the leaves wilting a bit, simply cover the plant with a clear dry-cleaner's bag and place in the shade for a week or so. I do not recommend defoliation, although this will not harm the plant.

### **Moisture and Light Requirements**

As with any vigorous plant, privet likes plenty of water. At the same time it is fairly drought-resistant. Should you accidentally let your privet get too dry, the leaves will wilt, then quickly drop off. This is a safety mechanism for the plant, and provided you soak the victim soon after you notice the wilting, it will recover. Privet does best in full sun, but will grow satisfactorily in partial shade.

### **Pests and maladies**

There does not seem to be much standing between privet and robust health. Tent caterpillars will munch them a bit in spring once they have defoliated the sweetgums, but rapid recovery makes this little more than an annoyance. None of the diseases which plague other species seem to bother privet. I have seen an occasional mild case of chlorosis during rainy spells, but usually it remedies itself. I have not experienced root rot with privet, and I feel keeping your soil drainage up to par will preclude any concern

over this fungus. [Author's note: I've seen an occasional attack of whitefly. These are easily handled with a mild pesticide or even hand removal; just be sure you get them before they multiply to excess.]

### **Give privet a try**

Any bonsai enthusiast, and especially the beginner, can benefit by adding Chinese privet to his or her collection. Its ease of cultivation and rapid development rate make for an ideal learning experience, and in just a few years' time, a strikingly attractive bonsai.