

A photograph of a tree whose trunk has been meticulously shaped into a chair. The trunk starts as a single, thick, gnarled base at the bottom, which then splits into several vertical, curved sections that form the backrest and seat of a chair. The top of the trunk branches out into a dense canopy of green leaves. The tree is planted in a circular area of brown mulch. In the top left corner, there is a small, dark, rectangular box with the word "Innovation" written in a gold, serif font.

Innovation

# Live Art!

**G**rowing furniture in your garden can really be exciting. You can cultivate artefacts and jewellery pieces too! Let me assure you, this is not my imagination gone *Harry Potter*. "Tree Shaping" is the art and technique of growing and shaping trunks, branches and roots of trees and other woody plants into furniture and accessories.

Peter Cook and Becky Northey of Pooktre have been Tree Shaping since 1987, and for them "this is an art form." Those who are not familiar with and are skeptical about the laborious techniques involved in this process need not fret, the process is quite simple. By grafting, shaping, and pruning the woody trunks, or guiding branches, trees are made to grow into ornamental or useful shapes like furniture, artefacts and jewellery, though research is necessary when choosing suitable trees. Lending insight Peter says, "Generally we look for mature trees that grow well in that area, and are less prone to insect damage and less susceptible to disease. Any tree species has the potential for



Peter Cook and Becky Northey of Pooktre grow furniture, artefacts, jewellery and much more...





shaping. Each type of tree has its own quirks, but they can be understood with time and experience."

Broadly, there are two approaches to tree shaping. **Instant Tree Shaping** where small trees of 6 to 8 ft. (2 to 2.5 m) length can be bent into the desired shape. The time taken for shaping may only take from an hour to half a day.

**Gradual Tree Shaping** is where seedlings or saplings of 7.6 to 30.5 cm length are shaped while the tree is growing to get the desired shape. The design and setup are fundamental to success of the piece. Pooktre guides us through various styles:

**Architectural:** Planting and shaping trees into structures such as archways, rooms, houses, tunnels, gazebos, etc. There are two methods within this style: using trees to form the structures or using both trees and inclusions to form them.

**Living Art:** Shaping trees with the intention that the design will continue to grow for the duration of their lifespan. This style includes



abstract, symbolic and functional designs.

**Intentional Harvest:** Designs where trees are cut from the ground, dried and finished.

**Inclusion:** An item, often inert, is positioned so the growth of the tree includes and holds the item. Examples include tabletops, stained glass and mirrors.

In 1987, Peter started wondering if he could 'grow a chair', but nothing grew the way he expected. In 1988, he planted a wattle that was to be a harvested as a potted-plant stand. He watched and learned about different tree reactions. In 1995, Becky became his partner and they spent a lot of time talking about the possibilities of trees. And Pooktre was born in the Spring of 1996. Peter and Becky reveal the finer nuances of Tree Shaping ...

**What is your inspiration behind Pooktre?**

To expand our knowledge — a thought becomes a living being; where fantasy turns into reality.

**What are the types of creations you have at Pooktre?**

We have a wide range right from chairs, artefacts, candlestands, hat stands, mirrors and jewellery, etc. We are also shaping trees suitable for use within city areas as living examples: living seating, shelters, signs and lights.

**What are the difficulties or challenges you often face?**

The environment, wind, storms and animals.

**What are the specific climatic conditions suitable for Tree Shaping?**

Climatic conditions don't matter. Selecting the tree that grows well in the location is what is really important.



**After you have created a piece, how does one maintain it?**

With living trees, once the design is mature it needs the same care as any garden tree. The harvested pieces, however, can be finished like any wood furniture.

**If someone is interested in acquiring a piece from Pooktre where can they contact you?**

Our living trees are not available outside Australia because of quarantine. But we do collaborations with people if they wish to have a living tree shaped. Our harvested pieces can be shipped anywhere.

**Can Tree Shaping be done in India?**

Yes, the climatic conditions are suitable.

**What are the types of trees that will be suitable for us?**

One needs to do research to be certain, but one could safely try figs, guava, mango and olives.

**What kind of a future do you see for Tree Shaping?**

Once people know and understand what we can do, it will change their view of trees and therefore the world. Most people seem to think Tree Shaping takes too long, that's not how it should be viewed. Rather think of it like this: the time you spend shaping a tree is captured by the tree and then amplified. 20, 30, 50 or maybe a few hundred years from now people will be able to see a tree shaping that you did today.

**A LIST OF SOME OF THE TREES THAT CAN BE SHAPED**


Box elders (*Acer negundo*)  
 Sycamore (*Platanus*)  
 Fig (*Ficus*)  
 Cherry (*Prunus*)  
 Black cherry (*Prunus serotina*)  
 Crepe myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*)  
 Maple (*Acer*)  
 Ash (*Fraxinus*)  
 Guava (*Psidium*)  
 Oak (*Quercus*)  
 Poplar (*Populus*)  
 Teak (*Tectona grandis*)  
 Wild plum (*Prunus myrobalan*)  
 Weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*)



**What do you think makes your work special or unique?**

John Gathright, Co-Founder and Head TreeClimbing Japan and producer of the Growing Village, said that 'we have the most refined pieces in the world, and that they rare and fine jewels'. I think that says it all.

**Do you have a favourite piece or two? Why are they special to you?**

For me it's the mirror that Pete and I designed and planted together in 1998. When we were planting the seedling it had a nice root system, and Pete said let's use the roots as a stand for the mirror. I did most of the cleaning up of the mirror and I was carrying our second child during this time. The trees are Pete's passion and for me they are a creative outlet 

*If this has triggered your imagination too, and you wish to plant tree for multifunctional benefits, contact Pooktre via Email at [pooktre@ihug.com.au](mailto:pooktre@ihug.com.au)*

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