



## Kokedama: Moss Balls and String Gardens

Kokedama evolved with a combination of three aspects of bonsai: *nearai*, *shitakusa* and *kusamono*.

- *Nearai* literally means “root-wash” and is a step in preparing for the repotting of bonsai. It has come to mean a plant which has been pruned and grown until tightly root-bound in its pot, and then removed completely from that pot for display. The roots and their soil mass maintain their shape when taken out of the pot, sometimes having been washed to fully expose the interlaced roots. They are displayed on shallow trays or plates.
- A *shitakusa* is used as a balancing element to the focal point of a bonsai display. Each is a miniature arrangement of wild grasses, ferns or flowers which represent the season and, to some extent, the location of the tree that is featured. *Shitakusa* add an ephemeral aspect to the longevity of the larger bonsai. The plants are presented simply on a mound of moss-covered soil in a shallow ceramic or wooden dish or tray.
- *Kusamono* have a similar aesthetic, conforming to the seasons and giving the impression of place, but are larger and the central focus of the display. They are usually displayed on a mat, board or flat tray.

When the elements of these bonsai techniques are combined – the pot-less style of *nearai* bonsai and the natural, herbaceous style of *shitakusa* and *kusamono* – you can see the origins of *kokedama* or moss balls. Hang them up with twine and a pulley and you may have started your own String Garden. Here are instructions for two *kokedama* methods, “instant” and traditional:

### *method 1.*

If you have a somewhat larger plant with an already established root system, you can make an (almost) instant *kokedama*.

- Remove your plant from its pot, letting any loose soil fall. Shape the rootball into a round, orange-sized ball.
- Soak preserved sheet moss in tepid water and squeeze out excess.
- Wrap the rootball with small pieces of moss, overlapping where necessary, covering it entirely, up to the plant’s stem.
- Tie a loop of twine around the “equator” of the ball and then wrap it around in every direction to secure the moss.
- Immerse the *kokedama* ball – not the plant – completely in tepid water for about 5 minutes, remove and let drain.
- Make another loop of twine and hang your *kokedama* as a string garden or display it on a dish or plate in indirect light.
- Plan on soaking once or twice a week, depending on the humidity of your home and the type of plant you have chosen.
- *Kokedama* may also be displayed outdoors during the summer but should be protected when heavy rain is expected.
- Add water-soluble fertilizer at half-strength to your soaking water every two to three months.

### *method 2.*

This method is good for smaller plants with more delicate root systems. It is also more durable than the “instant” version and may last longer.

- Remove your plant from its pot and shake off almost all the existing soil. Wrap the roots in a small amount of sphagnum moss and then wrap a short length of cotton thread around this to keep the roots in a cylindrical, finger-like shape.
- Mix the soil for your *kokedama* ball in a ratio of seven parts peat moss and three parts bonsai soil/*akadama*. Add enough water so that it can be easily molded into a ball that won’t fall apart.
- Poke a hole in your *kokedama* ball that correlates with your plants cylindrical root mass and gently insert the plant. Lightly press the hole closed around the plant’s stem.
- Proceed to wrap in sheet moss and twine as instructed above. Display and care instructions are also the same.