

MONTHLY TIPS

When you bring your bonsai out of their winter storage you may find an excessive amount of moss. If moss covers the entire surface of the soil it will limit the flow of air and moisture to the root system. And if the moss is growing up the trunk of your bonsai the result is usually fatal. Thin the moss to allow air and moisture to penetrate to the root system and remove all moss from the tree trunks.

Spring is a good time for cleaning. Take an old toothbrush and a mild soap solution to gently scrub the trunks of your smooth barked trees. You will be surprised to see the amount of grime that is removed. You will not only remove dirt but also bugs, fungi, moss and the same time stimulate the tree.

If your display benches are in an area of high winds you should consider tying the containers to the bench – especially if your trees are large. A sudden wind can easily sweep the bonsai and container off the bench. Aluminum bonsai wire is very useful.

MAINTENANCE PRUNING

Pinching back (finger pruning) and trimming of terminal growth results in secondary growth further back on the branch. The result is increased fullness of the foliage which causes the tree to appear more mature. If such grooming is not done, the most vigorous shoots will grow thick and strong. The upper branches of a tree always grow more vigorously than lower branches. Failure to groom the top branches will encourage top heavy growth and the withering of the lower branches. If done properly pruning will result in delicate twigs at the apex and strong lower branches.

Pruning of conifers such as junipers, spruces, cedars, larches and cryptomeria is done with the fingertips. Hold the branch (near the tip that is to be pruned) between the finger and thumb. With the other hand, grasp the leading shoot and gently but firmly pull the shoot straight towards you in one quick motion. On a mature bonsai you should pinch shoots all over the apex and on the lower branches as necessary.

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Pines and deciduous trees are usually scissors trimmed. Hold the end of a deciduous stem. Then use your scissors to cut through the stem immediately above a leaf. Pine candles can be trimmed by placing a fine, sharp scissors at the base of the candle - make sure not to cut any surrounding candles. Many club members prefer to use their fingers to twist off two thirds of the candles. Pine candles can still be shortened in May. If there are three or more candles to each bunch start pinching the largest, then in a few days the next in size, and so on until all have been reduced. This procedure promotes new breaks on the branches, shortens internodes, reduces the length of the needles, and encourages growth of the weaker candles.

When your spruces show new growth use the same candle pinching technique to promote breaks and control the length of internodes. Your junipers will need constant plucking during the growing season.

Excess moisture and sunshine will cause long internodes on deciduous trees. Let the leaves develop. Then be sure to cut back to two or three leaves on each branch. Do not prune the entire tree at the same time. Wait. At seven to ten day intervals you can prune about one fourth of the tree each time. The desired ramifications of your bonsai are achieved mainly as the result of spring and early summer pruning. Do not neglect pruning your trees in May.

INSECTS

With spring also come insects and diseases. Check your supply of fungicides and insecticides. Check your trees every day. Don't wait. Counterattack at the first sign of infestation. Use a separate bottle (appropriately labeled) for each chemical. Preventative measures are helpful in controlling insects. The area under your benches should be clean — no leaves, weeds, puddles, etc. Use a commercial insect spray under your benches and along the pathways of your bonsai garden. Always read the labels of insecticides and follow the instructions.

FERTILIZERS

Most of our members prefer a coarse soil because it promotes root growth and prevents root rot. However, such a soil retains very few nutrients. Thus, it is important to apply a liquid fertilizer on a regular basis. I try to remember to fertilize at half strength every week. In addition I use Osmocote (a slow release fertilizer) whenever I repot

WIRING

Spring is a time of rapid growth. Inspect each of your bonsai carefully. Be especially alert for old wires. Remove all previously placed wires. In the spring both branches and the trunk grow rapidly. If old wires are not removed the bark can be permanently scarred. If upon removal of the wire the limb does not hold the desired position you must rewire the limb.

WHY DO WE REPOT BONSAI?

A bonsai is confined to its container. At some point it will fill the container with the roots and become "pot bound." Air, water and nutrients will not be able to penetrate the root ball. The tree will suffer and eventually die without some action being taken.

Your deciduous trees should be repotted first. Conifers may be repotted up until June. Plants that flower early (such as azaleas) should be repotted as soon as the blossoms begin to fade. Protect newly repotted trees from the wind and direct sun for at least three weeks. Keep the soil moist but not wet. One month after repotting begin to fertilize weekly at one half the recommended strength.

HOW OFTEN TO AND REPOT AND WHEN?

There is no simple way to say "repot every x Years." The answer depends on the age and species of your tree, the size of the pot, and most importantly the health and vigor of the tree. But, as a guide younger bonsai are usually repotted every one or two years and older trees less frequently.

The ideal time to repot is when the tree is awakening from dormancy. The optimum time is when the new buds are swelling. This is when the tree has vigor. The reserves it built up during the previous year are being brought into action for the new season's growth. When repotting you usually remove about one-quarter to one-third of the current root ball. Dead roots, thick roots and damaged ones are also removed. Something blunt and nonmetallic (such as chopsticks) are good for untangling roots. Be gentle. Use sharp tools when cutting roots.

After repotting the tree, water it well. Place it where it is protected from frost and has a good airflow. Don't water again until the soil begins to dry — which indicates the roots are active. Don't fertilize until the tree is actively growing. Once all is well the tree can be put back into its normal display position. Then water and fertilize as usual.

-Jim Hagan