

MONTHLY TIPS

January may seem like a dead month for bonsai. However, the reality is that there are actually a lot of things that can or should be done this month. In fact, it can be downright busy! We'll look at some of the chores we should be considering.

PRUNING, WIRING, STYLING

This is a great time of year to style and wire many evergreens, especially pines. You can be very aggressive in pruning pines, and at least mildly aggressive in pruning other needle evergreens and junipers. Take some time and look at your tree. Is there another planting angle or change in front that would improve the tree? Are there branches that need to be removed? Thin out or remove bar branches, branches on the inside of curves, branches that are too thick towards the top of the trees, etc. Stand a piece of wire at the site of your new front, and begin restyling. First remove the "junk". On junipers and spruces, remove all lanky downward oriented growth, growth in the crotches of where branches divide, and small yellowed foliage; on pines, remove all needles more than one year old. Wire the tree starting at the lower parts and working towards the apex. Bend the branches into the desired shape as you wire; with evergreens, usually you want the branches to be directed downward. Carry the wire out to the very tips of each twig. Usually you want to turn the tips (the past year's candles) of pines upward, and flatten out the branch tips on junipers and spruce. When you have finished detail wiring a pine, you won't believe the difference!!

Deciduous trees are a bit of a different story. The branches get stiffer in the dormancy, and will snap much more easily. Also, if you stretch the cambium and put little tiny hairline cracks in it, the branch may die, especially if you then allow it to freeze. Thus, this is a relatively lousy time to style and wire these trees. However, it's a great time to make major cuts. If you want to shorten your tree by chopping the trunk in half, or you want to totally remove the first branch, or some other major cut, there are only two times of the year you can do this: the day of repotting, or now during mid-winter dormancy. Any other time of the year, the tree (especially if it's a maple) will bleed forever. I've seen trees bleed for literally two years! The reason you can do this on the day of repotting is that cutting the roots simultaneously prevents the bleeding. But dormancy is a better time, because if you wait for Spring, the roots put forth all the stored energy into the trunk and branches, and then you cut this off and throw it away, robbing the tree of some of it's stored energy.

Tropicals can be wired about any time, including now. However, you probably don't want to do too radical of a restyling during dormancy or you could lose branches.

INSECT CONTROL

This is the time of year when the indoor pests have been partying all winter uncontrolled, and have built up their populations to the point of being ready to make mincemeat out of your indoor bonsai. One spider mite can multiply to over 100,000 spider mites in a few weeks in warm dry conditions with no wind or water to knock them off your trees indoors. Unfortunately, unless you want your pets to get cancer, your visiting relatives to get paralyzed, and the rest of your family to be driven out of their home by the most pungent and disgusting smells imaginable, you can't spray big-time insecticides inside your home. I always laugh when I read the "helpful hints" in the bonsai books telling me to dip my plants upside down into a sink full of warm soapy water. I visualize myself hiring ten men to dip my 200-pound ficus on rock into some sort of industrial tub in my living room. No, thanks.

There are a number of safe, effective approaches. Insecticidal soap works quite well and is odiferously acceptable, only leaving a mild residue on your carpets and floors. Some of the pyrethrin based "indoor" insecticides are OK, but spider mite usually mistake these substance for vitamins. You can also obtain predatory insects, including predatory mites which eat only spider mites, mealy bug destroyers, and in fact a predatory insect for almost any specific pest you can name. There is no substitute for nature, though, and getting the plants back outside in the spring.

READING AND PLANNING

This is the best time to catch up on all those bonsai magazines that you didn't get a chance to read, or to look up exactly how to pinch and prune a particular tree, etc.

This is also the time to look over your trees and decide what needs a new pot. If you're like me, you'll have ten pots of every size except the one you need. Do you have all the soil you need? Screens, wire, etc? It's hard to get these on the spur of the moment in the spring Take pictures of your bonsai so you can review their development in later years. Finally, relax, because it won't be long until you are buried in things to do with your bonsai.

-Doug Hawley