



Preparing Your Bonsai Trees for Display

Prepared by Ardie Apostolos for the 1/15/2013 PBS Meeting

Your tree reflects your artistic style, and all that you have learned to date. Come to the show, bring your tree, and enjoy explaining your vision to the public. It is very satisfying to watch the viewers enjoy your bonsai thru your words and their own eyes!

To get your tree ready to show in a bonsai display:

1. Clean up the tree:

- Late fall and winter are good times to keep looking at, and refining the small shaping that needs to be done. This is especially true with deciduous trees. Reserve “styling” or “restyle” of a tree for early spring; but smaller cuts to bring the pads back, is done in winter. Also look for “stubs” which may have been left from a previous styling session, and cleanly remove them.
- While we often bury our tree’s roots in the spring and summer (to promote the growth of larger roots), winter is time to expose them by pushing back the soil towards the edge of the pot. If there are small roots which are growing up the trunk above the soil, these can be snipped at the trunk and soil line, as they detract from the larger buttress roots (Nebari) that you are trying to develop. If you are going to show the tree, remove this top layer of soil, as it usually contains branch snippets, wire pieces, leaves, etc. A new, fresh layer of soil looks better for display anyway. Feel free to

use fine pebbles, plain scoria, plain chicken grit etc., as one of these may enhance the effect which you are going for with your particular tree, such as deep forest, craggy ridgeline, desert, etc.

- If there is a nice covering of moss surrounding the trunk, you will approach this differently. Moss should not grow up the trunk of the tree. Moss should not cover up nice buttress roots, and moss should not have little plants poking up thru it. Moss looks best at the base or underneath the root, so don't let it get away from you. Moss also needs to be weed and debris free, so get your little brushes and tweezers out.
- If there is calcium deposit on the base of your tree, it can be worked on with a SOFT nylon brush to remove the deposit. I find this is best done when the tree is dry, rather than wet, as brushing the wet calcium deposit tends to pull off bark.
- Trees which have been wired for awhile should have the wire removed. If your branch is not staying in the position you wished, you may rewire it, taking great care to have the wiring job look professional and not tacky. For the most part, we try to show a more finished tree, rather than one under construction. There are times when it is nice to show a wired tree as a public education tool in shows. (Matsuri, or any venue where we are invited to give a talk on bonsai) For most very formal shows, wire is kept to an absolute minimum, and rarely shows on displayed trees. (i.e., very fine wire on finely ramified branches)
- Do not put any lime sulfur on a tree's Jin or Shari just prior to a show! The yellow color will not show the tree well at all, and the smell will drive participants away!

Pine trees: Pull off dead needles, and needles which grow on the underside of branches. On Stone Pine, there will be a few needles which are twice the length of the others, and those should be pulled off.

Deciduous trees: Remove old or damaged looking leaves and any wire that has been on for awhile. This is especially true of winter or "Silhouette Trees". It is wonderful to see the tree's "skeletal" branching, not wire or lingering dead leaves.

Juniper trees: Hopefully you have been pinching back these types of trees often. This helps them remain nice and compact, and not turn back into bushes. However, all this pinching creates those dead needles at the tips, and all of this needs to be picked out when preparing the tree for display. The primary way to rid your Juniper of brown needles is a long session with a pair of tweezers. Play

some enjoyable music, or listen to the T V whilst you pick! You can then finish by applying a fine spray of dormant oil, such as Volck Oil Spray. An application during the winter is good for the tree anyway, as it kills overwintering insects and their eggs. This spray also has the advantage of bringing out a nice green color to the dull wintered foliage. (I find it also enhances stone pine, and olive trees) Just follow directions for mixing, put it in a spray bottle to apply, and cover up the soil, and the pot with plastic wrap or newspaper first.

Olive trees: The leaves on our olive trees tend to show a lot of water spotting. These can be removed from each leaf by gently rubbing the topside of the leaf. Again, time consuming, but it will show how much you care about your tree.

2. Clean up the pot:

- The pot may have areas of calcium deposit on it, which needs to be removed as best as you can prior to a show. If you transplant your trees often, and are diligent about a good cleaning prior to putting the tree back in place, and if you are also diligent about oiling the pot, this job will be easier as the calcium deposits are kept to a minimum. If the deposits are minimal, you might be able to get away with a fine coat of oil rubbed on the pot otherwise a scrubbing is in order. This may necessitate removing the tree from the pot. Gently "lift" the tree out, (disturbing the roots and soil as little as possible) setting it down on wet paper towels, and further wrap the top of the root and soil with wet paper towel, keeping the whole thing damp and out of the sun and wind!

The most efficient way I have found to clean mineral deposit from pots is with muriatic acid, a brush and a lot of patience. This swimming pool acid can be caustic and dangerous to humans, as anyone who has ever splashed it on their skin, or breathed in vapors can attest! Wear gloves, eye protection and a face mask to prevent trouble. Pour out a little acid in a container, and work from that container with a brush rather than soaking a pot in the acid. On glazed pots, it is best to use a rag to apply the acid, and try the acid on an inconspicuous area first to make sure there is no damage to the glaze. Once you have gotten off as much of the mineral deposit as you can, wash the pot. Rinse the acid off the pot with water, followed by cleaning the pot in a tub with Lysol and water, and then rinse, rinse, rinse. Let it dry.

Place new screen in the bottom of the pot, and apply a fine layer of oil to the outside of the pot with a soft cloth. I have found that Walnut Oil, (comes in a can from the grocery) to be my favorite. This oil does not get thick on the pot, turn sticky, or have an unpleasant smell. Refrigerate it to keep it from going rancid.

- Now you are ready to secure the tree, and its present soil, back into the pot. Unless you have a thick, solid root mass, this will necessitate wiring into the pot as you are going to transport the tree. Moving a tree in the pot could cause a lot of damage to the roots if it jiggles around in the pot.

On another note, bonsai artists often have a “precious” or expensive heirloom pot which they use for a specific tree. This pot is not the pot in which the tree lives, but is only the pot in which the tree is placed for a show. If for example, you have a pot that is very shallow, but you love the way the tree looks in it, you may change out a tree to such a pot for display. The process of lifting a tree from one pot to another, and then back again, will not cause the tree harm, if you take great care with the roots. This work is best done a few weeks before a show, allowing the tree a rest period before it is moved in a car, and again the tree must be wired in place.

- Water your tree thoroughly in the early afternoon a day BEFORE the show for a small container, and a couple of days BEFORE for a big bonsai tree. This is to prevent any water from leaking on the stands or tablecloths used for display. Make sure that your bonsai tree and accent plant have a label with your name on the BOTTOM of the pots and stands. Secure as many little felt bumpers as you need on the bottom of the pot to prevent any damage to the tops of EXPENSIVE bonsai stands. If you have a specific “front” to your tree, mark it by placing a piece of wire, coffee stirrer, etc. This is very important for round pots. For the most part, you will not be the one setting up the display; others will be in charge of that. When you sign up for a formal show online, you will be asked specific s about the trees you wish to show. Please don’t substitute one tree for another species at the last moment, they will not be accepted for display, as a proper name tag has not been provided for the tree. Therefore, watch your deadlines closely.



Calcium and mineral deposits can be partially removed by gently picking or brushing with a soft brush (old toothbrush). Do not use a metal brush or Dremel, as this will damage the bark.



Small, unsightly roots growing up the tree trunk should be removed.



The browned needles of a juniper tree have to be painstakingly plucked out with tweezers.



Moss looks wonderful in a bonsai pot, however it should not cover up the important root system which needs to be seen.

The large wires on this tree indicate that it still under construction as a bonsai. Typically we only show these trees in an educational setting for the purpose of demonstrating wiring. This wire would be removed for a formal show.