

September Bonsai Tips

(Thanks to Boon Manakitivipart for his monthly tips which he sent to his students and clients for many years, on which many of these tips are based.)

September can be a difficult month for our bonsai, often with remaining hot summer days during at least the first half of the month. Global warming can make this period even more challenging. The second half of this month usually involves milder temperatures and shifting to fall care.

Watering: Make sure your trees are well watered. Strong trees, especially conifers, will consume a lot of water this time of year. Weak trees, on the other hand, will have more difficulty taking up water, even when well-watered. If you have a weak tree, keep it under shade and mist it several times a day on hot days.

Fertilizing: All your bonsai (unless in poor health) should be fertilized until the beginning of winter. Danny Coffey likes Biogold Japanese organic pellets (which can be applied directly or placed inside tea bags), and Bjorn Bjorholm uses Gro-Power tablets (12-8-8). For a liquid fertilizer, use fish emulsion, which former Curator of the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum, Warren Hill, thinks is the best.

Deciduous Trees: Start giving your deciduous trees more fertilizer to strengthen them for winter.

Fruiting and Flowering Trees: The main task at this time is to feed. Light thinning can also be done.

Japanese Black Pines: Be cautious about how much fertilizer you give black pines. Too much fertilizer will cause the needles to grow too long, whereas too little may weaken the tree.

Care: In mid-September, protected trees can usually be moved into a sunnier location. If you have placed sphagnum moss on the soil surface of your bonsai, it can be removed when the daytime highs drop below 80°F. If you are not sure, it is safer to leave the sphagnum moss on the trees.

Although you can leave sphagnum moss on satsuki azaleas yearround, replace old moss with new moss at least once a year to maintain good drainage. Spring is a good time to replace it.

Note: Boon recommends using sphagnum moss as a top dressing on your bonsai (especially those exposed to strong sunlight) to assure you have good root growth in the top few inches of the soil in your bonsai containers.

Japanese Black Pines: If the needles on your black pine were too short last year, misting it a couple times a day in September will make the needles grow longer.

Note: It is too early to work on Japanese black pines and red pines. We should wait till November.

Junipers: Pinching new growth on junipers should be minimal or avoided this time of year. Long shoots can be cut with scissors. But we can style and wire junipers until spring.

Japanese White Pines and all high mountain pines (Lodgepole, Mugo, Ponderosa, Pinyon, and Scots pines): They can be wired from September to March.

On healthy five-needle pines, remove old needles, leaving only this year's growth. On weak pines, old pines or weak branches on strong pines, retain year-old needles to strengthen the tree. Old needles on white pines will start to turn yellow or brown at this time of year.

To maintain a refined white pine, it may be lightly thinned after the old needles are removed. The goal is to equalize the tree's energy by removing strong buds and keeping the same-size buds throughout the tree.

We can treat Ponderosa, mugo, jack, lodgepole, and other high-mountain pines the same way as five-needle pines. For Ponderosa pines, it is safer to cut the old needles, and not pull them off.

Conifers with a single set of growth per year (Spruce, Hemlock, Fir and Yew): These bonsai can be worked on in September to March. They can be cut back and wired.

Japanese Maple: Continue to feed it moderately until the leaves turn color in fall. No heavy pruning or wiring at this time.

Trident Maple: Continue to feed and prune lightly. It is too late in the season to defoliate.

Broadleaf Tropical Trees: Ficus and buttonwood should not be defoliated at this time of the year. They need fertilizer to grow and to gain strength. Light wiring and thinning can be done. For major pruning and styling, it is better to do in late spring and summer.

Repotting: Boon believes it is important to repot quince in the fall. Quince repotted in the spring are susceptible to root gall, a disease that can weaken or kill a tree. But do not remove as much soil from the root ball now as you would in the spring.

Wait until spring to repot decandled Japanese black pines, recently wired white pines, or trees that are weak.

Bonsai repotted in fall need at least 6 weeks of warm weather to develop new roots. They also need extra protection in winter. If you cannot protect your trees well, wait until spring to repot.

Suitable trees to work on this month:

- Japanese five-needle pines
- Ponderosa pines, lodgepole pines and other high-mountain pines
- Junipers
- Spruce and hemlock
- Cypress and false cypress
- Broadleaf evergreens