

April Bonsai Tips

Watering:

During later winter into early spring your trees should be watered once a day. The best time to water your trees is around 11-12 am. Watering too early, the trees may stay too dry in the afternoon. Watering in late evening, your trees will stay wet all night and it may cause a fungus problem.

If you cannot water at the ideal time, it is better to water in the morning. For small trees, use a humidity tray to help your trees to stay moist during the day. Another option is to set up an automatic watering system to water your collection. If you can water in the morning, have it come on around 1 pm.

Make sure that your trees receive enough water. As the weather warms, water trees more frequently with less water, but never wait for your trees to completely dry out before watering. As a general rule, water when the top 30 percent of the soil is dry. Water needs vary by variety, soil mix, pot depth, and location in the yard. Check each tree by using your finger or chopsticks and digging into the soil at the corner of the pot. Akadama is a good moisture indicator. It turns darker brown when wet and light tan when dry. Fruiting and flowering trees require extra water. It is recommended to cover the soil's surface with white sphagnum moss to preserve moisture.

Turning trees:

Turn trees 180 degrees once a month, or 90 degree every other week.

This will keep the tree in god balance. Every branch will get the same amount of sunlight.

Insect and disease control:

Spray for insects as a preventative. It may be too late when you see them. Try to avoid these surprises by spraying insecticide every 4-6 weeks during the growing season.

Be careful with deciduous trees that still have tender leaves, insecticide or fungicide can burn new leaves. Merit granules can also be used as a systemic insecticide. Sprinkle lightly on the surface of the soil. Bayer tree and shrub and 3 in 1 systemic. Is NOT recommended. It is designed to use on the trees and shrubs in the ground; It can be too strong for your bonsai.

Consider spraying a preventative fungicide once growth hardens off. Do not use systemic fungicide on pines as it will kill beneficial mycorrhiza in the soil.

Fertilizing:

For the trees in training fertilize early. The goal is to get thick trunk or branches. Do not worry about long internodes and big leaves or long needles. Big leaves and long needles will help the trunk to grow large. The technique will change after the tree is refined; That is when you want to avoid long internodes. Organic fertilizers are preferred. Products such as miracle grow can be too strong.

Organic fertilizer cakes made from rape seed or cotton seed meal (store-purchased or home-made) work well. Start with small amount and add a little bit more on once every week or two. The best liquid organic fertilizer is fish emulsion. Use it weekly. ½ table spoon per gallon. Wait at least four weeks after repotting bonsai before fertilizing them. For mature deciduous trees, wait until new leaves harden before fertilizing lightly. If you fertilize too early, or too much, both leaves and internodes may grow large and long.

Feed Japanese black pines heavily in spring to help the trees bud after decandling. For a twelve inch long pot, start with four to six fertilizer cakes and add a few more every few weeks. When the surface starts to get full, remove old cakes and replace them with new ones. By the end of May, the surface of the pot should be covered with fertilizer.

Begin feeding white pines lightly when the new needles open, usually in May. Apply a light to moderate amount of fertilizer through fall, starting with 4 cakes for a large tree and adding 4 more in late summer.

Repotting:

Many trees can still be repotted in April. If growth has hardened off on deciduous plants, it is too late to repot. For pines, repotting is fine until the candles elongate and needles start to show. Junipers tend to be more tolerant of later repotting, but if temperatures become significantly warm, defer repotting until the following season.

Once trees are repotted, you will need to protect them from hard freezes; frost, but not a hard freeze, is tolerated by most plants post repotting. Consider bringing in your freshly repotted trees into the garage if temperatures fall below 30. Be cautious about using tarps as protection, as temperatures can rise quickly underneath once the sun comes up and can be detrimental.

Pinching:

Whether or not a tree needs pinching is the most important question concerning your bonsai this time of the year. Pinching techniques are often different from species to species. Before you start pinching your deciduous trees, ask yourself what stage of training the trees are in? Pinching should only be done on **refined deciduous bonsai** after branches and the overall structures have been developed. If your deciduous bonsai is in an early stage of training, let new buds grow freely and wire them after they harden (early to mid-summer around May-June). Because these buds grow fast, you may have to rewire your trees several times in a single season. By wiring young branches, you can add interesting curves where they are needed. In fall or early spring, cut these long branches back to a desired length so they can begin to grow freely again the following season. This treatment will strengthen your bonsai and promote good root development. Cutting those long shoots leaving 2-3 sets of buds, you create new interior branches.

If you pinch junipers too early, you will delay the development. You should let the junipers in training grow freely then wire new branches. Remove old leggy branches. Branches that have become too thick should be made into jin. Do not cut thick branches too close to the trunk since the scar will not heal over.

Most bonsai publications offer good information for pinching well developed bonsai. Here are some general guidelines:

Japanese Maples:

Use tweezers to remove the center buds leaving a single pair of new leaves.

Trident Maples:

Cut off the elongated center of the bud beyond the cluster of newly opened leaves. If the new buds do not elongate, it may not be strong enough to be pinched. Feed it until you get the long shoots. Then you can pinch. If there is not an elongated center, just cut large leaves. ***Do not pinch like Japanese maple***

Beech:

Use tweezers to pinch back to two leaves after the buds open and the leaves start to unfold. Beeches are usually the last deciduous bonsai to open. Other option is to let it grow and cut back with scissors.

Elm:

Let the branches grow to about 10 leaves then cut back to 2-4 leaves. (keep more leaves for Seiju elm or Hokkaido elm as well as all the dwarf elm)

Zelkova:

Let the new branches grow to about 6-8 leaves. Then cut back to 2-3 leaves

Scale Junipers:

Pinch only when strong pointed shoots (runners) grow about half an inch to one inch beyond the general outline of the branch, usually in April or May. ***without runner, the tree is not strong enough to be pinched***

Needle Junipers:

(This applies to Juniper rigida only) Let new shoots elongate before using very sharp scissors to cut new growth back to a quarter inch or less. Do this from mid May to mid June.

Mixed foliage junipers:

(Procumbens, San Jose, Foemina) cut strong shoots (runner) with scissors to another strong growing branch.

Wiring:

Deciduous trees in training: We can start wiring them toward the later part of the month. Let the new young branches grow freely. Wire and bend the branches at the base. We need only about 4 inches from the base of the branch. Then let the tree grow. Check wire frequently as it may cut in quickly.

Conifer: When conifers are active the bark and the hardwood split easily. Avoid heavy bending this month. if you have to do it, use raffia to protect the bark from separating from hard wood.