

January-February Bonsai Tips

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

The December Deep Freeze

We saw at Christmas time 2022 that our weather is not only becoming hotter but also much colder, with extremely low temperatures near zero in our area for several days. We have to hope that our winter protection was sufficient for our temperate bonsai and their containers that were left outside. This will be a true test of the hardiness of those bonsai and their containers, as well as the required level of their winter protection.

If you think that your winter protection was insufficient and another deep freeze comes our way during these 2 months, it would not be a bad idea to improve whatever winterizing system we had put in place last December.

Watering

Watering, of course, is different for bonsai overwintered in a garage, greenhouse or cold frame rather than outside and presumably protected in some way from the cold.

For those bonsai staying outside, provided they get rain and morning mist, they may require less watering than those inside. But even when it rains, check your trees, as sometimes the canopy of your bonsai can repel water and leave the soil in its pot dry. On the other hand, when it's sunny and above freezing, be sure to check your outdoor trees, especially conifers and broad-leaf evergreens, as they may need more water than you think. For deciduous trees outside, they might need water only once a week or less during cold periods.

The best time of the day to water outside bonsai in winter is during the day when it is sunny between 11 am and 1 pm. If that time is inconvenient, water in the morning, and avoid watering in the evening or at night. If we have a frosty or freezing night, ice can damage roots, and frozen water can break pots.

For those bonsai kept inside, it's best to check them every few days. If the air is still, they may stay wet longer than if you have a fan or open door moving the air around and drying them out. Bonsai can dry out quickly and be killed if too close to a fan.

If you are using akadama, it can help you gauge watering needs: if the soil surface is a light color, you will need to water. You do not, however, need to soak the tree every time you water.

Lime-Sulfur Spray

If you haven't already done so, you can still spray lime-sulfur as a dormant spray. As explained in the December Bonsai Tips, lime-sulfur is both a fungicide and an insecticide, and will kill insect eggs, fungus, and scale. Boon uses about 6 ounces of lime-sulfur per gallon of water), whereas Danny is more conservative and generally uses only 2-3 ounces per gallon of water.

Daisuke Nomoto, the Japanese bonsai professional who was Boon's "senior" at the Japanese nursery where Boon apprenticed, "strongly recommended" (in Boon's words) that Japanese Black Pines should be sprayed with lime-sulfur twice in the winter, in order to prevent serious fungal attacks that can kill them during the growing season.

For a more complete discussion of the use and cautions of using lime - sulfur and the alternative copper fungicide, please see the December Bonsai Tips at <https://www.blueridgebonsaisociety.com/tips-advice-more>.

Repotting

In our area, January is generally too early for repotting, but some like to start repotting in February. Repot deciduous trees first. For those bonsai kept inside (e.g., in a cold frame or greenhouse), your bonsai will come out of dormancy before the trees outside. Therefore, you will need to repot those bonsai before the buds start to grow.

Be sure to protect bonsai that have recently been repotted. Keep these trees around or above 40° F and away from excessive cold and wind.

Recipe for Basic Boon Mix (a mix successfully used throughout North America):

- 1 part lava rock
- 1 part pumice
- 1 part Akadama for conifers; 2 parts for deciduous bonsai
- ½ cup of horticultural charcoal (per 5-gallon mix)
- ½ cup of decompose granite (per 5-gallon mix)
- All ingredients must be bone dry, screened and sized, with the dust discarded.

A thin layer of coarsely-screened New Zealand sphagnum moss should be placed on top of the new soil. The moss will keep the soil in place during watering. The thickness of the moss layer should vary according to climate and watering habits.

Wiring

Winter is an excellent time to catch up on wiring. Skillful wiring is effective and beautiful to look at. For photographic examples of good wiring techniques from Rebecca Ayre's Beginning Bonsai class at the NC Arboretum, see her PowerPoint at <https://www.blueridgebonsaisociety.com/tips-advice-more>.

As for other basics, here are Boon's wiring tips:

- Anchor the wire well at the point where you start, either at the fork or at the base of the main branch.
- Use the minimum amount of wire to do the maximum amount of work.
- Spin the wire when applying it, and do not press the wire against the branch.
- The wire should be stronger than the branch being bent.
- If a wired branch springs back after bending it, the wire is too small for the job. Remove that wire and reapply with a larger wire.
- Two lengths of small wire do not do the same work of one length of larger wire.
- Even spirals and even spacing between branch and wire make the job neat and beautiful.

- 45 degrees is the typical angle for applying wire, but this angle can be elongated to 30 degrees. In this range, the wire has the most holding power and is most pleasing to look at.
- Be sure the wire supports the back side of the bend to avoid broken branches.
- Avoid crisscross wires. Crossing wires causes more pressure when you bend the branch, and it is also difficult to unwire.
- The wire should not be too tight or too loose. It is said that the best space between the wire and the branch is just enough to allow a piece of rice paper to slide through.