

Bonsai Instructions

Definition: The literal meaning of the word “Bonsai” is “planted in tray”.

Bonsai began in China as the collecting of naturally stunted trees from the wild and growing them in dishes. The hobby was quickly adopted by the Japanese and today they are the real masters of this ancient art.

The general idea is to re-create in miniature form a mature tree as it might be found in nature, a scaled down replica, one might say. Taking care of bonsai is relatively easy and a lot of fun, however there are some interesting individual requirements you should know.

Position – Bonsai are essentially outdoor plants requiring a position open to all aspects of weather, fresh air, sun and rain. Its position need only be changed in Summer when part shade will be required to protect from burning in strong sun. Although they are outdoor plants, they can be brought inside for display. They can be kept inside the longest in Summer, for up to several weeks in a position with filtered sun and fresh air. However in the Winter no more than a few days at a time. The only exceptions are plants which are normally used as indoor plants, i.e. Figs.

Watering – The most common reason for bonsai plants dying is due to lack of water. Bonsai must be kept moist at all times. Bonsai dishes can dry extremely fast and so must be checked regularly, particularly in Summer when daily watering is essential. Hot days may require watering twice. A handy method of assuring your bonsai will survive in very hot weather or on holidays, is to sit it on a tray of pebbles sitting in water.

Pruning – This is where the real pleasures of bonsai can be found, in pruning your bonsai, you are shaping it. It now becomes your creation. Branches that may need removing are those growing in towards the main trunk, branches growing straight down or those that hide the main trunk, a major feature of any bonsai.

For most trees, allow new growth to develop for a month before cutting back.

To maintain the current shape of your bonsai, simply pinch out the tips of new growth.

Repotting – Repotting need only be carried out after 1-3 years for fast growing plants and 2-5 years for conifers, depending on variety. Not that often at all! Repotting is carried out to provide fresh soil and to also prune the roots if they have grown into a solid mass. Pruning the roots will stimulate the growth of fresh new roots, provide room for fresh soil and help to stunt the bonsai. Remove the plant from the pot and wash most of the soil away from the roots. Cut off 1/3 of the roots and replace into pot with fresh soil. If you require your bonsai to grow bigger, replace into a larger pot. Use top soil or potting mix. Repotting should be carried out in Winter when most plants are dormant.

Fertilizer – As your bonsai grows it will take food from the soil. To maintain a healthy plant you will need to replace this food. Organic fertilizers are best, such as fish emulsion or slow release products such as Osmocote. As your bonsai is only in a small pot, apply only half recommended measures for pot plants. Fertilizing is best carried out in Spring and Autumn. Do not fertilize if soil is dry or for a few weeks after repotting.

Wiring – Wiring is a way of training your bonsai to a desired shape. By winding copper or aluminium wire around a branch or trunk you can move it into any position you wish, effectively creating a whole new shape if desired.

Check wire regularly to make sure it is not cutting into the branch. Wire should only be left on until the branch has grown into its new position and then carefully unwound or cut off.

All these factors help to make and maintain a bonsai. There are many differing opinions on how to grow and what makes a good bonsai, but all bonsai have several things in common. As the pot is small the root growth is restricted, and in turn, foliage growth is restricted. The rest is all up to individual ideas, pruning, shaping, wiring, etc.

Every bonsai is an individual with a unique character all its own. Your bonsai will become your creation – treat it and enjoy it as such. The older it becomes, the more valuable it will become to you. In Japan it is not uncommon to find trees hundreds of years old. If you should require any help or further assistance in growing your bonsai, please don't hesitate to ask. Bonsai make an excellent gift, a gift of life for life.

Caring for your bonsai throughout the year!

This is a month by month run down on how you can tend your BONSAI through the four seasons of the year. As the climate throughout Australia varies quite considerably from state to state and in fact from city to city within each state, for this reason we will concentrate on the Melbourne Metropolitan area. Having purchased your BONSAI from Collectors Corner we presume most of the trees will be grown and cared for in this area.

As you know, Spring in Melbourne starts on the first day of September, but your tree may not recognise this fact. There could be a difference of up to four weeks either side of the first of September when your tree responds to the climatic influences of the warmer weather. So remember, these are just guide lines to the monthly activities and it would be suggested that you acquaint yourself with the procedures required the month prior to and after the one on your calendar.

AUTUMN – March

This month is still hot, so please watch your watering.

If it is cool, you can safely re-pot most BONSAI at this time because the second growing season is about to start. Therefore you will have ample time to re-establish the root growth before the onset of winter.

If growth is still vigorous, fertilising can still be carried out at this time of year- half strength is recommended.

Powdery mildew can become a problem during autumn rains – spray with Berylate or Fongarid.

Insect pests, snails and slugs can be a problem at this time of year. Spraying and snail bait can help.

April

April is the month when the beautiful autumn colours on your deciduous trees begin to appear. It is a month when little work is required, so you can spend a lot of the time enjoying your trees.

Some of the things you can do however is to remove any dead needles on your pines, clean them up generally and cut off any dead wood, this allows more light and air to circulate around the tree.

If the weather is still warm, check the wire on your trees. The wood on the trunk and branches begins to thicken in autumn due to the tree storing food for the next growing season. If the wire is cutting into the bark, remove it immediately and re-wire loosely if necessary.

May

After all the leaves have dropped from your deciduous trees, now is the time to clean up your BONSAI area for the long cold winter months. Don't leave old leaves in pots or around your BONSAI benches. They not only look unsightly, but also encourage pests and diseases.



Your trees will need less water now that they are going into their winter dormancy, but be careful, you can get several warm days in a row in May and your trees could dry out, so check them daily and water when necessary.

If you have fruiting or berry trees, remove the fruit or berries now, if they are left on longer than May, it will weaken the tree, which may produce dieback and not give you as good a crop of fruit or berries next year.

WINTER – June

This is a great time of year to shape your trees. With your deciduous trees all the leaves have fallen and now you have the skeleton and you can see where the excess growth from Spring and Autumn has spoilt the tree's shape. Firstly, cut off any dead wood, then re-shape to suit your individual concept of what you think the tree should look like.

Fertilising is out over the winter months. Your trees now should be fully dormant and no food is required over this period.

If you got into the habit of regular watering over the warmer months, now is the time to change that habit. If the soil in your BONSAI pot is constantly wet over these winter months root rot can occur.

July

This and the next month are the main months for root pruning and re-potting. If you think that your trees have become pot-bound and need a root prune and change of soil, this is the month to carry out the task. With the onset of warmer weather the cut roots will soon heal and send out new feeder roots, thus giving your tree more vigour in the spring growing season.

July is also a month for weeding. Weeding should be carried out through the year, but now is the time to clean up the weeds in your pots before the onset of spring. In Melbourne, we at Collectors Corner, find that Liverwort and Star Grass is a real problem. So if you can eradicate them at this time of year, your problems in Spring will not be as great. Be aware of hail – as it can damage trees quite badly. All figs should be brought indoors now as frost can be dangerous.

August

This is a very busy month on the BONSAI calendar. The first signs of the warmer weather will be showing in your trees, especially the deciduous ones. This is a good time for re-potting and root pruning your deciduous trees, as the forthcoming warmer weather will help re-generate new root growth and help it recover from the trauma of root loss.

When root pruning, it is advisable not to fertilise for at least three weeks as this may burn the newly emerging feeder roots.

When top pruning your trees in August, don't throw away the cutting. Now is the time to put them into propagating sand to start a whole new crop of potential BONSAI.

SPRING – September/October/November

This is probably the busiest and in fact the most fascinating time of the year for the BONSAI grower. This is the time when we really have to get to work. Re-potting and root pruning should be just about completed by now and we are anxiously awaiting the onset of the new spring growth. Timely root pruning in late winter stimulates the tree and with the onset of spring encourages new top growth on your BONSAI. Controlling this new growth is what will help you maintain or change your BONSAI's shape.

If you are happy with and just want to maintain your BONSAI's shape, it is important to nip out any vigorous new growth that becomes elongated and spoils the shape of the tree. But if you want to drastically change the shape or maybe thicken a particular branch, this is the time of year to do it. For instance, if you have heavy branches at the top and you want to thicken the lower branches to develop proportion in your tree, keep the top of the tree nipped back and let the lower branches to grow out unchecked. Therefore, most of the vigour from this spring's growth will go into the thickening of the branches that need it most. This may spoil the shape of the tree in the short term, but in the long term your tree will be improved and eventually everything will be in proportion.

Another thing to watch for in Spring is the condition of your tree. If your tree has shaping wire on it, now is a good time to take a good look at it and see if, with the onset of spring growth, that the wire is not cutting into the bark of the tree. With the swelling of the branches you may notice that the bark is being damaged by the constraints of the wire. If this is so, immediately remove the wire. If the limb (or trunk) hasn't set in the desired position, still remove the wire and re-wire if necessary.

Continue fertilizing at this time of the year and also watch for aphids on new young shoots. These should be removed with a strong jet of water or a weak chemical spray.

With the onset of the warmer weather, watering is of the utmost importance. Hot mid-day sun and warm winds will soon dry out the small amount of soil in your BONSAI pot. On very hot days it may be necessary to water your BONSAI twice a day, that is morning and evening.

SUMMER – December & January

These two months are critical for your Bonsai's health. This is when you must pay very close attention to watering. It is also a time where you should check your trees for pests and diseases. Caterpillars can be a problem in early Summer. If you see signs of leaves being eaten, thoroughly check your tree for this pest and remove by hand or with an insecticide. Aphids can also be a problem at this time of year.

Figs and other tropical trees should be re-potted, and large foliage removed – roots can be pruned. Autumn colouring trees should be protected at this time. Maples and Liquidambar could be put into a shady spot to protect the leaves from sun burn. This in turn will result in fresh undamaged leaves giving you that beautiful colour in Autumn.

February

The care of your Bonsai in February is very similar to that of the first summer months. The thing to note this month is to rotate your tree, thereby giving it the full force of the sun on all faces thus encouraging full development of all buds right around the tree, not just in the front.

Re-potting this month should not be attempted except in an emergency. The only possible exceptions are figs and cedars.

SUMMARY

This is the end of your BONSAI calendar. If you wish to be a successful BONSAI grower, just follow these simple rules. It is not hard work, but a little attention each month will see your trees prosper, increase in value and give you great pleasure throughout the years.

If you ever have any problems with your BONSAI please do not hesitate to contact us. Our expert and friendly staff will answer your questions and advise you on how to care for your tree further.

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