

The Art of Bonsai

By Eugene Howell

One of the things I have always found interesting about virtually any hobby is that there are unique actions and techniques, for each hobby, that have been developed to prepare items for entry into a show. These may consist of (among many other things) a special diet to get a very glossy coat on a horse, special brushing and trimming techniques for chinchillas, special cleaning techniques for coins, etc. – the list is endless. So it should be of no great surprise that there are things that one should do with a bonsai before showing it, if you want your tree to be on the same competitive level as all the others.

So what are some of the actions usually taken by a “knowledgeable” bonsai showman?

In bonsai, as all hobbyists know, small leaves are of special value. For this reason, if you enter a display or show with a tree on which you have not tried to miniaturize the leaves (if they need it), you are already far behind the power curve. So you need to begin the “getting ready for a show or display” by doing something about their size. There is a side benefit of trying to decrease the size of the leaves. If you completely defoliate the tree (the usual technique for leaf reduction), the ramification of it usually increases and this significantly adds to its beauty. Since new leaves don’t just spring out after defoliation, the process for getting ready for a show should start about 12 weeks ahead of the show date. This allows plenty of time for the tree to produce a full head of hair before show time. Having said all this, keep in mind that if the show is in mid winter, you need to think twice before defoliating. Most trees, even tropical ones, are very unhappy about having all their leaves pulled off at that time of year, so don’t do it. In this case you are safer to show the tree with whatever sized leaves it has.

The next thing to think about, which should be done immediately after defoliating, if that task is appropriate, is wiring so the branches are exactly where you want them. By the time new leaves have developed, the branches should have lignified and the wire is ready to come off. So the tree goes to show with smaller leaves and branches where the beauty of the tree is maximized.

A couple of weeks before the show you need to begin evaluating the pot to make sure it still is appropriate for the size and shape of the tree. The canopy may have increased in size to the point that the pot now looks far too small, or the style in which the tree has grown may not now be totally compatible with the pot. In both cases a quick pot change may put the bonsai in a stronger competitive position. Taking a tree out of one pot and putting it into a larger one, or one with a different personality, doesn’t take long and may be just what is needed. Don’t be confused by what I have just said: I am not talking about doing any root pruning at all, just moving the entire tree, roots and all, into a different pot.

When you get down to a few days before the show it is time to do the final touches on the bonsai.

To make the trunk show at its best, you need to clean it. Take a fairly soft toothbrush and water and clean the trunk as far into the canopy as you can. This removes dirt, moss and lichen and brightens the color of the bark. If you have shari or jin you need to determine whether it is as white as you wish. If not, then at least 10 days before the show put lime-sulfur on it. You may need a couple of coats of the lime-sulfur and each coat takes two or three days to thoroughly dry and turn white (if you put a second coat on before the first is thoroughly dry the lime-sulfur may take on a distinct yellowish tint), so this is why you begin at least 10 days before the show.

If you changed pots within the past few weeks, chances are that not much more than a wiping down will be needed on it. However, if there are mineral deposits showing anywhere on the exterior surface, you need to do something about it. Never show a tree with mineral deposits painfully visible. If the pot has severe deposits then you may have to pull the tree out of the pot and soak the pot in a solution to remove it. Obviously, if this is the case, you need to do this about a week ahead of the show date. If, on the other hand, the pot has only minor mineral deposits showing, then a rubdown with WD40 or similar light oil will hide the deposits until after the show. This should be done on the day of the show to maximize the beneficial effect during the period of the show.

The day before the show is a good time to take care of “downers” and “uppers”. Hopefully all of you know what these are, but just in case you don’t, they are leaves that point down or up and break the overall outline of the tree. When looking for downers, remember that the branches themselves should be the lowest part of each leaf pad, so any leaves hanging below the branches should be pulled. Each leaf pad and

the apex of the tree should have distinct outlines, so any leaf that sticks upward above this outline should also be plucked. While you are doing this job is a good time to also look for oversized leaves and remove them. Even though you have not gone through leaf reduction, removing the largest leaves will help significantly.

Finally, on the day before the show, put a top dressing of new bonsai soil on the bonsai and, if you are lucky enough to have some, put a random placement of moss on the soil. The more random the placement, the more natural is the effect.

If you are planning on having a tree in our annual show at the Zoo in November, you naturally want it to look its best. Try these tasks and I am sure you will enter a tree that looks the best it can.

Good luck!