

# The Art of Bonsai

By Eugene Howell

When this newsletter arrives, Florida will be in the midst of spring, with its pleasant days and warm evenings. Trees will be pushing new leaves, or already have them fully displayed. And every bonsai enthusiast will be well underway to finishing the spring chores required on his/her bonsai. Yea, right!

If you are like me, there are some bonsai jobs that seem to get put off more quickly than others, and although many jobs are complete, others still are waiting to be done. No matter how much I ignore them, they just will not go away. So rather than continuing the discussion begun in the last newsletter, let's switch to the discussion of bonsai spring chores. We can get back to the discussion of the four fundamental environmental factors next month.

The first thing to think about when making the list of spring bonsai chores is which ones are **not** appropriate for your bonsai after its sap begins to flow and buds begin to open with new leaves. Deciduous trees (those that lose their leaves during the winter and then go dormant) are best worked on during the winter. Once the buds have swollen and leaves begin to emerge, it is too late to do severe root and major branch pruning. These should have been done in February. This includes such species as Maple, Elm, Black Pine, Juniper, Titi, hornbeam, Bald Cypress, Liquidambar, and Crape myrtle, among others. So, this moves several of your bonsai to the back burner for some jobs and you can start thinking about those that never went completely dormant.

Fertilizing is one of the major jobs that you should be doing now. All your trees, including the deciduous ones, need to be given a healthy dose of a good, all-around fertilizer. As the trees begin to push new growth they need all the nutrients they can use. This can either be in the form of a fast release granular type, one that is applied in a liquid form, or the type that releases its nutrients over a period of months. Of these three, since you are trying to jump-start your tree for maximum spring growth, I recommend a liquid fertilizer applied weekly at ¼ of the dilution recommended for monthly application. After four applications (four weeks) you can switch to whatever type you prefer.

While discussing fertilizing, one more bit of information needs to be pointed out. Few fertilizers contain all the minerals that a tree needs in order to grow at maximum rate. One way of counteracting the fertilizer's shortfall is to also use something like Fish/Kelp liquid fertilizer. It usually has a rating around 4 - 2 - 4 so you run a minimum risk of over fertilizing. The important thing is that it naturally contains several dozen micronutrients that the tree needs. If you supplement your fertilizing schedule with this a few times each year, your plant should never suffer from the lack of any minor elements.

The second job that needs to be undertaken is major branch and root pruning on plants such as Ficus (all var.), Bougainvillea, and Ilex Shillings, among others. As we move into April you can add plants such as Jaboticaba and Fukien tea to the list and in June and July finish out the heavy pruning job by tackling Neea buxifolia, and Buttonwood.

On all your trees, this is a good time to do the tip pinching that is needed to enhance ramification. Your trees will be responding to the first spring fertilizer by putting out lots of new growth on all twigs. Remember to pinch each twig when it has put out four or five new leaves. When you pinch be sure to leave at least two leaves. This job, by the way, is one that goes on continuously from March through December.

Spring is also the time for sprucing up the pots that have begun to show stains and deposits. After spending so much time developing a beautiful tree, why blemish it by having it in a dirty pot. Use a soft wire brush, and soap and water to gently scrub the exterior of all your in-use pots. If you have difficulty getting all the deposits and stains off a glazed pot, use a lime/calcium remover. When doing this, be very careful to prevent any of the liquid from reaching the tree or soil. Since unglazed pots will absorb liquids, the use of chemical deposit-removers is not recommended for them; just elbow grease and soap and water.

Finally, you can spruce up the surface of the soil in each pot by adding a thin coating of fresh bonsai soil (some use pure Turface). Also keep an eye out for new moss that you may find growing around your house (or your neighbor's house when he isn't looking). Add a few pieces in strategic places in each pot and if you are lucky it will flourish, covering the soil surface in a matter of months.

With all this completed, sit back and congratulate yourself. You probably have the best looking (and certainly best kept) collection in the area.