

The Art of Bonsai

By Eugene Howell

You have a beautiful bonsai that is planted in the perfect bonsai soil, watered daily, fertilized well during the proper part of the year, pinched when needed, and repotted every few years. You are rewarded with a tree that grows vigorously, blooms (if appropriate) profusely and is the picture of health. Then one day you notice that the leaves are beginning to do strange things. Some leaves have a mottled appearance, with many, many, tiny light-green or yellow spots all over them and others are beginning to curl up like a rolled cigarette. If this has never happened before you can be puzzled about what is happening?

In two installments I want to give you an idea of what to look for (and do) when this happens to you.

Living in Florida has many great benefits. It also has a few drawbacks because Florida also turns out to be a paradise for bugs and disease that attack plants. The sooner we recognize this, and learn to identify these problems when they appear on our bonsai, the better-off the bonsai will be.

Let's first talk about the pests that most frequently attack your trees (there are many more that infrequently do the same thing). There are five to watch for in most cases. These are aphids, mealy bugs, thrip, spider mites and scale.

All five of these pests do the same thing; they pierce the cell of the leaf or stem and drain the sugars from it. This causes that cell to die, turning yellow in the process. If there are hundreds of these insects, each killing dozens of cells, one at a time, you can easily understand why the leaves become mottled in coloration and eventually die if the insects are not eliminated. This can also happen to whole branches and in very severe infestations never brought under control, the entire plant can die.

You may be thinking "all this is well and good, but how do I identify them and once I have, what do I do?"

Aphids are pear-shaped, tiny bugs that are easily visible with the naked eye. They can be light green, brown, or almost black in color. There are two very quick ways to determine whether your tree has them. The first way is to examine the tops of the leaves. If there is a black, sooty-looking substance covering part or all of some of them, then you have aphids or mealy bugs. This is called sooty mold. Don't get alarmed by it; it is harmless and if left alone will eventually wash off by rain or watering. This mold is a sure giveaway on aphids or mealy bugs because it grows in the sticky, sweet secretions (called honey-dew) from these pests. When it completely consumes the honey-dew it dies and is eventually washed off.

The second way to identify that the tree has aphids is to turn several leaves over and examine the bottoms. If you see small, pear-shaped insects, you can congratulate yourself for having identified them.

They are very poor flyers so one way to handle them is to spray the tree with a strong stream of water. You need to pay particular attention to the undersides of the leaves and the stems. One spraying will not eliminate the aphids. Some will hang on and some will return, but the total number will have been significantly reduced. So if you do this a few times, the aphids should be gone for the time being.

Aphids can easily be eliminated (for the time being) by use of either a home-made remedy or an insecticide that says it will handle aphids. The home-made remedy consists of the following: into a gallon of water put 3 tablespoons of cooking oil and 3 tablespoons of baby shampoo. Gently mix this (you don't want a bottle full of suds) and spray on the undersides of the leaves, stems and trunk. Do this again in 10 days and then monthly thereafter. This remedy, and others that contain oil, should not be used on Buttonwoods and Fukien teas. These two trees have a tendency to shed all their leaves when an oil spray is applied.

Both of these methods will easily keep aphids well under control.