

Spring Season Review

As Bonsai enthusiasts, the onset of Spring often can't come quick enough. The dark cold Winter has usually meant survival mode, our Bonsai tucked away in their Winter protection with owners eager to start enjoying their collection again and commence the work they have been planning over Winter. Here are some of the tasks and tips we need to be aware of in Spring.

- **Repotting.** Spring is the best time to repot most species of trees and shrubs used for bonsai. However, Spring can be a mixed bag in terms of the weather and this can be a dangerous time for Bonsai. In our eagerness to get on with the Bonsai year, we must remember that just because it has turned to March does not have to mean that all systems are go and we must get everything re-potted as soon as possible. With the exception of Larch, which will most likely be the first species of a collection to be re-potted where timing is fairly critical, the window of opportunity for most other species is quite large. Most Bonsai books will recommend that trees be re-potted as the leaf buds have swelled, before the leaves have fully opened. This is sound advice but we need to use this alongside a close watch of the weather and long-range forecasts. Spring can often see a false start- a period of warm weather with overnight temperatures remaining above freezing. We also get clear sunny days which promote growth but very cold nights with frosts. Trees react to this changing environment with a stop and start, stuttered growth pattern before full-on continuous growth commences. This gives us a large window of opportunity in which to repot. In general, due to the nature of our weather at this time of year, it is suggested that a lot of enthusiasts in Britain repot slightly too early. The risk is having a newly re-potted tree, unprotected from the elements being exposed to frosts and cold winds. The tree can be sat in a cold, wet potting mix, not taking up water quickly due to not being in fully active growth. The tree will not get off to a good start to the season, despite the owners' best intentions of repotting early. Patience, like most things in Bonsai, is the key.
- **Removing from Winter Protection.** If we have kept some of our trees in a cold greenhouse or polytunnel over Winter then a decision has to be made at some point to remove them. Again, a close eye kept on the weather and long-range forecasts is key. We don't want to remove our trees too early and risk damage by Spring frosts or cold winds, but we need to keep an eye on warm and sunny days where dehydration could easily occur. A polytunnel maintains a more constant temperature inside as it doesn't magnify the warmth of the sun like the glass in a greenhouse does. Opening the door of the greenhouse as temperatures begin to warm can provide a halfway-house before complete removal.

- Feeding. Feeding should commence as soon as leaves have fully opened. Bare in mind that organic pellet fertilizer takes a couple of weeks to start to break down and be available for the roots to take up so can be applied slightly earlier. Liquid feeds are available to the roots immediately. The type of fertilizer used in terms of strength and NPK balance may depend on at what stage your Bonsai is at. Raw material, or a tree which needs to bulk up and put on some growth can be given a high nitrogen feed to promote this. Established Bonsai would not need a very high nitrogen feed (N) as this would encourage increased leaf size, which is to be avoided. If flowering and Fruiting is needed to be encouraged, then a feed which is higher in Phosphorous (P) should be used. A Bonsai which needs assistance with root growth and disease resistance such as a re-potted Bonsai would need a feed higher in Potassium (K). If in doubt, a balanced organic feed is best. Note that recently re-potted Bonsai should not be given any feed, especially liquid feed, for a couple of weeks after re-potting. Feeding soon after re-potting can damage freshly trimmed roots.
- Wiring and Pruning. Some of our trees would have been wired for the Winter period. In Spring, we need to monitor this closely for signs of biting in as new growth starts to swell and remove the wire as necessary. It is best not to apply fresh wire at this time of year with deciduous species as delicate new buds can be easily broken off. Major pruning is also best avoided at this time of year as the sap is now rising and large cuts can bleed heavily, dehydrating the tree. If the odd cut is made during repotting, make sure it is sealed well with cut paste.
- Watering. Winter will have been a welcome break from constant watering, with our trees just occasionally topped up to keep them moist. However, Spring sees the return of more vigilance with our watering regime, ensuring our trees don't dry out on warmer days.
- Thinking ahead for shows/exhibitions. We may have an idea at this time of year which of our trees we might like to exhibit later in the year. If the tree is being re-potted this year, it should be put in the pot in which it is to be shown in to avoid last-minute repots. If we are exhibiting a tree early in the year, we may want to start the process of harvesting moss growth on the surface of the potting mix. Naturally grown moss looks much better and more natural than clumps of collected moss hastily placed on the surface the day before the show.

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