

A Bonsai Close-up on Monthly Bonsai Tasks in the Northeast

By Pauline F Muth Copyrighted 1990 last revision 2003

January Indoors

Semi Tropicals and some hardy trees are budding out in response to the increasing length of daylight. Repotting of these trees must be done as the buds swell or before. Begin fertilizing these trees including trace elements and iron. The new rapid growth requires lots of trimming to insure good ramification. Sunny days are a wonder in the greenhouse but be careful of dark days that will cause weak development on the trees.

Tropicals are holding their own under lights. In the Greenhouse, tropicals are still losing leaves. By the end of the month small signs of new life have appeared.

White pines and other young pines kept in the greenhouse are still prunable and wireable. Do not repot older pines but young trees can be potted without radically disturbing their roots.

Pruning of greenhouse specimens can still occur while they are in dormancy. It is a good time to wire trees without leaves.

Sharpen tools, check the pot and soil supply for spring planting. Winter is a good time to sketch dream trees as you observe nature in its winter coat of snow.

January Outdoors

Checks the plants in winter storage. Freezing weather in a protected shelter usually will not harm bonsai but dehydration will. Some winters include periods of freezing and thawing as the

outdoor temperatures change. If the temperatures have been changing, check to see if water is needed. Larch left on the ground under evergreens also need to be checked if thawing has occurred. Check for rodent damage.

January Diary (record what you observe)

February Indoors

Growth is incredible and heartwarming in the greenhouse. Hours are spent trimming the new growth. Trees like elms and pomegranates respond to the increasing light rapidly and cannot be neglected. The major problem is inconsistent light. Stormy and cloudy days can develop weak growth. Artificial light can be of great help. Set it up to lengthen the natural light available.

Tropicals are showing growth as the month progresses. Trimming may be needed. Begin fertilizing tropicals in growth.

White pines kept in the greenhouse have bud swell. This marks the end of major pruning of pines. Repotting of pines kept indoors can begin. Do not forget to add spores to pine soil.

Prepare the work area for the heavy repotting schedule of the upcoming months. Prepare the pots needed with screening and tie

wires to save time in spring. Stock in a supply of fertilizers and mycorrhizoid spores.

February Outdoors

Trees are still in storage and we can have some of our worst storms. Check carefully for drying but otherwise keep in storage.

February Diary

March Indoors

Temperatures in the greenhouse are very warm. Night temperatures may be increased by a few degrees to match the increasing daytime temperatures and decrease temperature shock for the plants. Be sure to vent excess heat. (During late winter much of our house heating comes from my attached greenhouse venting into our basement and spreading throughout the house.) Everything is growing. Fertilizing is definitely on a regular basis. All indoor repotting is complete. Tropicals must wait until their summer "dormancy" period for repotting.

Many trees are flowering in the greenhouse. I do not fertilize while a bonsai is in flower. As the flowers fade, the trees are pruned and repotted as needed and fertilizer is restarted. (Note: Do not fertilize trees after a heavy root pruning. Instead use a root stimulant hormone and a transplanting fluid when you transplant.) Flowering trees are always given superphosphate in addition to their regular fertilizer to promote flowers and fruits.

March Outdoors.

This is the month of indecision in the Northeast. Some years I have been able to bring all trees out of storage, other years we are still in winter. The key word is watchfulness. I use my yard plants as a guide. As I see bud swell in the yard, I bring out the trees. But many a year, has seen me gathering trees with tender buds in my garden cart and wheeling them into the garage for protection during an unexpected cold snap. If the trees go onto the yard stands, repotting starts and does not end until all trees are examined and transplanted as needed. Wait until after flowering on appropriate trees. If the weather is not cooperative--wait! Super hardy trees like larches are out on the benches. (Remember I never put them into closed in storage but rested them under the old trees of a spruce grove out of the wind.)

March Diary

April Indoors

Trim, trim and still more trimming. The greenhouse is bursting at the seams. I cannot wait for frost-free weather to move the plants outdoors. I remove the extra layer of plastic that protected my glass greenhouse through the winter and the sun pours in. I would like to take a lot of cuttings, but where will I put them? Do not put trees outdoors that have been in the greenhouse until the nights are completely frost-free. In my Zone 4 climate this is usually Memorial weekend. A few years here and there I have been able to do this a week or two earlier. Keep up the fertilizing and watch for wire damage, the trees are growing rapidly. Watch for bugs!

April Outdoors

Hopefully the winter storage trees can go out on to the benches by now. As the buds swell, fertilizing begins. Each bonsai needs trace elements and a regular balanced fertilizer. Flowering trees benefit from a high phosphate fertilizer. Be sure to put aside those trees that need repotting and get this done as soon as possible. (I label the trees that need repotting in the fall, so I will know which ones need immediate repotting in spring.) Wait a couple of weeks before fertilizing newly potted trees if root pruning was done.

This is the best month for styling new trees. Design forests, set up root over rocks, plant landscapes and plant future stock before they bud out.

Bud prune your trees now to direct the bonsai's energy only into the branches you need!

Remember to turn trees on the benches to develop even growth.

April Diary

May Indoors

The greenhouse vents and doors are wide open during the day. Watch carefully for insect invasion. Continue regular care and trimming. As frost disappears, move the bonsai outdoors but be careful. Many times I have had to rush to bring plants with tender growth indoors as the weather changed. Be careful of leaf burn. Direct light is a lot more powerful than greenhouse light. Start by moving the greenhouse plants into a semi shady location and slowly move to direct light. Be sure to turn your trees on a regular basis for even exposure to light. Clean the greenhouse as you empty it. In my cold climate, I often leave developing tropicals in the greenhouse for that extra boost of heat and humidity. I leave the doors and vents open. The greenhouse in summer is a super propagation house.

May Outdoors

By the end of May everything is outdoors and needs careful watch on trimming, watering and fertilizer. Most repotting and new planting is done. Watch the wires--this is the most dangerous month for wire damage. Clean jin and shari and lime sulfur them on a sunny day. Watch for insects. I use a soapy wash every few weeks for control followed by a clean water wash.

May Diary

June Outdoors

This is the month for pines. Candles are chosen for development. They are trimmed and needles are removed as dictated by each species. (See specific articles are the treatment differences for two needle and five needle pines.)

The beginning of June is the last time for defoliating some deciduous species. This should only be done on very healthy trees. It cannot be done every year because it will weaken your bonsai. Wiring should be done after defoliation.

Check all wires. Remove wire before it damages you tree.

Watch for sunburn on maples and hornbeams.

Prune and replant flowering trees after flowering.

June Diary

July Outdoors

Water, water, water. Watch for sun damage. Continue trimming. Rotate the trees.

Transplant tropicals as their growth slows to a halt for summer dormancy. Do not fertilize after repotting for 2 weeks.

This is the months to select branches that are over crowded and lacking light on evergreen. Trim, or wire to correct the problem before the over-shaded branches die.

Enjoy the garden!

July Diary

August Outdoors

Change fertilizer to increase phosphate and potash. Watch for heat damage. I prevent the overheating of small pots by keeping them in a damp terragreen bed during the summer.

Wire new growth that is not in line with your designs.

Remove wire that is no longer necessary.

Lime sulfur again.

August Diary

September Indoors

Frost can come as early as Labor Day here. So the greenhouse is clean and ready for winter. I give away a lot of cuttings that have filled the greenhouse in the summer. As the temperatures drop various bonsai are brought into the greenhouse. All tropicals come in on Labor Day. All bonsai are washed in a soap solution and rinsed with clear water before I bring them in.

September Outdoors

I am only fertilizing with Potash. Watering decreases, but because of my windy location I watch carefully for drying out. As leaves fall, I sweep them up and remove them. Most of the wire is removed.

September Diary

October Indoors

As leaves drop from semi hardy deciduous trees, I wait an extra week or two and then put them in the greenhouse. Leaves from tropicals already in the greenhouse fall and must be cleaned up immediately. Set out bait for slugs and mice to prevent winter problems.

No fertilizing is done in the greenhouse now.

October Outdoors

Leaves are falling and temperatures drop. Prepare the winter storage area. Stop fertilizing. This is the month to start major work in pines. Pines may be potted but waiting until early spring is best.

October Diary

November Indoors

Watch watering. The greenhouse is covered and sealed for winter. The furnace is clean and working well. Work on pines brought indoors. (Young pines and all 5 needled pines.)

Prune deciduous trees and wire.

November Outdoors

Clean and put all hardy trees into protected storage. Extremely hardy trees like larches can be tucked until evergreens for winter storage. Be sure trees are well watered before they freeze.

Do major work on pines.

November Diary

December Indoors

Keep everything neat and clean. Repot semi-tropicals in anticipation of new growth in January. Style the trees and wire. Tropicals are losing leaves.

No fertilizer.

December Outdoors

Cover the winter storage area after the first snow fall.
Sleep. Rest. Read.

December Diary