

## A Bonsai Close-Up on *Carissa grandiflora*: Natal Plum

By Pauline F. Muth copyright 2002; revised 2003

Natal plum is an evergreen vining shrub bearing thick, leathery dark green leaves and beautiful, simple white flowers. The flowers will develop into an edible plum that can be used in jellies. Today it is widely grown in subtropical climates and as an indoor plant in the cold climates.

In reality, it is a shrub rather than a tree that grows to small trees proportions. Branches have small sharp spines on them. If desired, the spines may be cut off. The leaves are thick, glossy and dark green and have thick white latex in their stems, which shows when cut.

### **Climate**

For bonsai purposes it is considered to be subtropical and will survive down to a 50 degree F temperature. . The idea climate will have hot summers with cool nights. In cooler climates, it is brought outside for frost-free weather and returned to the greenhouse or light garden culture in the fall before frost. In temperatures up to 70 degrees F, growth will be tight will short internodal spaces, in higher temperatures, new growth will be leggy and thin.

If brought into the greenhouse, keep damp and the bonsai will survive well in indoor conditions. If brought into a light garden, it will grow well throughout the winter. A southern or western window is required for indoor culture.

### **Soil**

Use a basic indoor bonsai mix. The soil must show excellent drainage and show be kept evenly moist but not wet. The plant must receive water throughout the year. More is required in summer months. Indoors, the plant can survive weekends without

water if necessary. Water daily from the top down. DO NOT allow the pot to sit in water.

It needs high phosphorus fertilizer to promote flowering and applications of iron twice during the growing season to prevent chlorosis. A dose of micronutrients at the end of December and in April is needed. The use of Biogold bonsai fertilizer once a month will give excellent results.

### **Repotting**

Repotting is best done in late winter or early spring before the new buds leaf out. In fast growing young plants, yearly repotting with root pruning is needed. In established plants, repotting should be done every two years.

### **Sun Exposure**

Although full sun is preferred, take care not to burn the leaves during hot dry periods. It will tolerate some shade. During the indoor period, provide the bonsai with as much light as possible although Natal Plum will survive lower light conditions.

To prevent disease and insect problems it needs excellent air circulation.

### **Flowers**

*Carissa* flowers are white and extremely fragrant. They bloom several times during the year. They are hermaphroditic (capable of self-pollination). Take care to remove pollinated blossoms as too many fruit can overtax the strength of this plant in a bonsai pot.

### **Training and Pruning**

The tree is best worked in late winter or early spring for hard pruning. Wire only the trunk and woody branches and raffia protection before wiring in young plants is suggested. It can be

wired at any time except while flowering. Larger branches can be very brittle. When wires seem too tight, they must be removed. They are used to shape the plant. Contact the studio for this if you are not familiar with the process.

Trimming of new shoots (those with 2-3 pairs of leaves) to one or two pairs of leaves throughout spring and summer is needed. Watch out for shorter rounded shoots. These are flowering shoots.

This tree works best in informal upright styles as well as cascade styling.

### **Propagation**

It can be propagated by soft woodcuttings, air layering or seeds. Bottom heat and rooting hormone is required for cuttings.

### **Problems**

The tree is generally free from most insects and diseases except for mealy bug. Treating the plant to a soap spray and clear wash periodically will reduce insect problems and good air circulation will prevent mildew attacks. Mealy bugs may be removed by a cotton swap dipped in alcohol.

Hard water deposits on the leaves can be wiped off with a soft cloth or kleenex.

Further questions and information contact

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