



American Bonsai Society

Bonsai in America

Written & Published by Dave Bogan

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Making a pine box

By Andrew Smith

I knew spring would come some day. It always does, though during the cold, white, drought of winter it doesn't always seem like it will. But it will, and it did, and suddenly in the space of just a couple days it's in full swing. The mountains are like green volcanoes

bursting with extending needles, leaves, flowers and shoots.

Much as I try to free myself from the white shackles of winter I am never ready for spring when it finally comes. Everything arrives at once and everything seems to need to be done yesterday and all my careful planning is swept away in the giddy chaos of the season. It's a tidal wave of sunlight, warmth and growth, and there's no hope of managing it. But maybe I can let it lift me along with the rest and I can ride out the flood. Or maybe not.

I get too much sleep in the winter and not nearly enough in the spring. Though the days are now longer, they are not long enough and at this time of the year if I could add a few hours to each day and a couple extra days to each week I gladly would. There are trees to be collected, trees to be potted, trees to be repotted, trees to be moved out of the greenhouses, trees to be moved into the greenhouses, trees to be fertilized, trees to be sprayed, trees (sadly) to be thrown away, trees to be packed up and shipped, trees to be photographed, buds that need plucked, branches to prune and wire, soil to mix up –not to mention shoes to tie, shirts to button and food to chew. I can't keep up with it and never have. The season outmatches me in every way, but I'm glad it's finally here.

Every winter I carefully prepare for spring. I order pots, tools, wire, bur-lap, fertilizer, soil components and tree permits. Essentially I make room in my bank account for more money. There's no sense in having it clotted up with a bunch of numbers anyway. By the time spring finally arrives you could usually fly a kite in there if you wanted to.

This year, in preparation for spring, I decided to make some wooden boxes to plant my newly collected trees in. I always make planting boxes for trees that are too big for an affordable bonsai pot, but this year I got a hankering to plant everything, or as much as I could anyway, in a wooden box.



I am an advocate for planting trees in wooden boxes, and if I was running for public office that would be the centerpiece of my campaign platform: "Wooden boxes keep America strong," or something along those lines. I wouldn't get elected, which would suit me fine. But there would be no compromise on the wooden box issue.

We have a lot of great bonsai potters here in America who I am not going to name (sorry Sara, Dale, Ron and everyone else), because that would be at cross-purposes with my goal; which is promoting the use of wooden planting boxes in bonsai.

Now, I'm not saying that a bonsai should *always* be grown in a wooden box. Certainly, as they mature and become more refined and developed they deserve a fine pot to bring out their best. But in my view, for the first couple years out of the field a wooden box is about the best you can do. And I did once see a picture of a literati bonsai in a Japanese magazine displayed in a round wooden pot. I was sorry I couldn't read the details.

I like wooden boxes for lots of reasons. The first reason is that I think they create a better growing environment for the tree. Wood absorbs moisture and then slowly releases it, which I think is a better situation for the developing tree roots. Wooden planting boxes also generally drain exceptionally well, unless you happen to be a shipwright and make them watertight. Wood also is naturally insulating and will give more protection to the tree roots from temperature swings and extremes than mica, plastic or ceramic.

And with wood you can make a bonsai container that fits your exact needs. If you want a cascade bonsai container that is precisely 26" tall and 9.75" wide you might search bonsai shows and online for years and never find one. But even if your carpentry skills are barely remedial on a good day, you can make a container that size in an hour for just a couple bucks in materials and maybe a banged thumb.

Wooden boxes can also be stained, painted on and finished to make them very pleasing to the eye. They have a nice rustic feel to them that just gets better as they get older. Eventually they look like an old collapsing barn in a field, but your tree will hopefully have moved on by then.

So, with all these great reasons to use wooden boxes stirring around in my brain, I went to the lumberyard and loaded up my pickup with various sized pine boards. Then I went home, and with hammer and saw and drill, I got to work.

I am not a great carpenter. I couldn't make a rocking chair, or probably even fix one. But I found that making a sort of square thing out of boards with a drainage slot in the bottom was not

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beyond me. So for days the sawdust was flying as I cut and hammered and drilled and stacked boxes on top of boxes.

Fred, my neighbor, came over to watch me work.

“Are those going to be chairs?” he asked. “No,” I said.

“Bookcases?” “No.” “Dog houses?” “NO!” “Hmmm, some sort of toolboxes?” “No.” “Short tables?”

“No, Fred! They’re for my trees.”

“You’re making tree coffins?”

“NO! Don’t you have to go practice your letters or something?”

“You don’t have to get snippy. That one has a hole in the bottom.” Then he left.

I never did get all the boxes made that I had planned to. The green tidal wave of spring swept over me before I got them done. But I did make a lot of them. And now, thankfully, it’s time to put them to use.



The Next Step—

Advanced Tips & Techniques

By Bjorn Bjorholm

Summer Watering

On the list of frequently asked questions, the subject of watering bonsai is perhaps the most common and important of all. Watering is a very difficult skill to master, and an even more difficult technique to teach, which is why I have been hesitant to attempt to explain it in writing until now.

At the outset, please keep in mind that the frequency of watering will vary from climate to climate and day to day, and is dependent on the soil medium one uses. Here at Kouka-en in Osaka, we use a highly free-draining mix of Akadama, Pumice, and Lava Rock in various ratios depending on species. The techniques discussed here are a general guideline to watering bonsai, but caution should be taken to adjust your own approach accordingly.

Each species is different, each individual tree is different, and the weather from day-to-day is different, which makes proper watering very difficult to learn. In order to water properly, one has to be willing to adjust on a daily basis. For most people who work full-time, though, this is rather difficult. We often tell clients to water their personal collections fully each morning during the growing season, and spot check in the evening, watering dry trees again as needed.

Here at Kouka-en, though, we keep a watchful eye on the bonsai at all times and check water on a much more frequent basis. The apprentices typically arrive around 8am and immediately walk the nursery with a watering can, spot checking each tree and watering only those that are exceptionally dry. On most days, around 10:30am, we use the hose and a watering nozzle to heavily water almost every tree in the nursery, with the exception of those that are still quite wet from the previous day (which is almost never the case, though we always check just to make sure).

After lunch, around 1pm, we once again walk the shop with the watering can, spot checking and watering only the driest trees. And again at around 3:30 or 4pm, we use the hose to water the trees that will likely dry out over night. This means we are checking the trees for watering on average four times per day during the growing season.

When watering with a hose and nozzle, hold the nozzle firmly, but allow your wrist to be loose enough to fluidly water the whole soil surface smoothly and evenly, aiming for the base of the trunk and trying to keep as much water flowing into the pot as possible. Be sure to water all of the soil surface, front, back and all sides.

For trees with surface soil that is loose, pull the nozzle back and try to keep the soil from washing away. It is certainly okay to go back and forth between trees several times to make sure they are each thoroughly watered. It may also be necessary to bend down to see the soil surface. Again, make sure to check each individual tree and water only those that are in need. Be sure to water the entire soil surface as well.

While techniques for watering may be difficult to communicate, teach and learn, they are the most essential element to keeping your bonsai alive and healthy and to promote proper growth and development. Some species require more water than others, some like to remain exceptionally dry, and each day the watering schedule for every tree must be adjusted accordingly, based on the weather and climate.

As the summer rolls around, be sure to keep a close eye on your bonsai and their watering needs.



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What Happened to my trees?

This winter and last summer have proven to be the exception to the rule. In many areas of the country including the far north and mid west, we have experienced extreme temperatures—both last summer and last winter. I'm not sure of the deep south but I'm sure they also had their extremes. During these times, we also experienced varying amounts of heavy rains and or the lack of rain. During winter, we experienced temperatures way below the average and winds stronger or more frequent than I remember. Actually the last couple of summers have bordered on long periods of drought and hotter temperatures. During these times, we tried our best to keep our trees watered but in many cases, the heat and dryness affected the root systems. Entering fall, many of our trees seemed to be healthy and we thought the worst was over. Now, enter a winter with colder temperatures and our slightly weak trees just couldn't handle it. Additionally, with the colder than usual temperatures, many of our trees had never experienced below zero temperatures. In my case, I even had some black pines in my landscape that entered spring with severely wind / cold burnt needles. Of my trees, I had one nice black pine that slowly declined and passed on come mid-may. I had some boxwoods that typically come through winter with a few brown leaves give up and die even before the spring warmth reached them.

Some trees this spring exhibited varying differences in how they budded or bloomed. I had two hornbeams that did not bud until mid June, four weeks later than others of the same species. Next came the azalea. One that typically blooms in early April did not bloom until the last week of May. Others bloomed late while one actually was in full bloom in early April.

All of this has taught us that it's not just a hot summer or a cold winter that can affect our trees. A combination of both extremes will weaken a tree and in some cases, it will take a year or two to finally succumb and die. Many may say that we did our best but truthfully, we need to try even harder. We can blame the weather but, in truth, we caused some of the problems. It may be a little late now but we need to remember all of these issues as we work on our trees this year. Some may still be slightly weak and in the process of rebuilding their strengths. This year, you might consider allowing some trees to simply grow and get stronger. In some cases, it can take a couple years to overcome stress. The best remedy is allowing them to grow freely and not stressed again by human hands. This summer, water twice a day, cover or protect the soil during extreme hot or windy days. If needed, erect temporary shelters during the summer from shade cloth or in winter from the cold. You might even consider building cold-rooms or shelters for the winter. Think about the last year and do your best to improve your tree's daily conditions. Learn from our losses and hopefully not have another terrible spring.

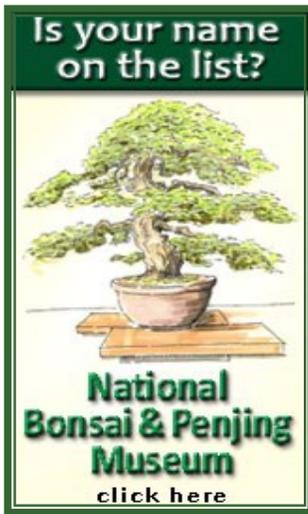
Odds and Ends



Tools, they must be kept sharp. Most every type of cutting tool if not sharp, will actually crush their way through a branch and harm the wood or underlying tissues. If the fibers are smashed and not cut cleanly, you will have some die back and the potential for disease increases. So many ignore this very basic task of keeping their tools sharp. I know with bonsai tools some are a little harder to sharpen such as knob cutters or rounded edge tools, but any tool with a flat blade is easy to sharpen. Probably the easiest and best to use are flat surfaced diamond hones that will work on regular and stainless blades. I use one as shown and keep it handy at all times. One tip, do not use a lot of force when sharpening. Most tools in good shape only need a couple of strokes with the stone or sharpening tool and you should only use slight pressure. Heavy pressure only digs in deeper and in many cases, will ruin the edge. So, before you trim or cut, Take a minute and give the tool a couple of strokes and it will help protect the wood its cutting.

Take time to **double check any wires** that you installed earlier this spring. Double check your trees to insure none are cutting in. Additionally, in many cases, you do not need to remove all the wire. Let it stay and do its job. In many cases, the wire will cut first on a branch as it emerges from the trunk. Removing this section doesn't always say the rest needs to be removed or in all areas.

As we move towards summer, hot weather and intense sun, it is very important that we **protect the top soil** in our pots from the weather extremes. The sun and wind can quickly dry out the top inch or so of soil which will greatly impact or possibly kill the fine feeder roots in these areas. Top dressings of moss or gravel become very important to stop this moisture loss. Keep in mind, on some trees this area of soil will contain 1/3 of the trees nutrient and moisture capturing roots. If these are allowed to dry out and die, it will greatly impact the

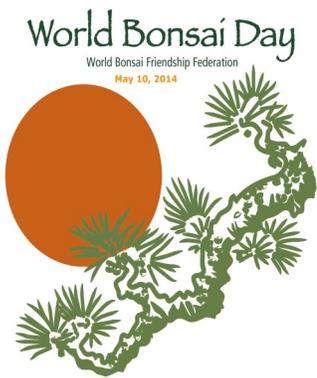


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trees health and vigor and your growing area within the pot has been reduced by 33%. In addition to rapid moisture loss, if you do not utilize some type of soil cover, the soil will also wash and move as it is watered. Soil movement will also kill or not allow roots to grow in this upper area of soil. This can easily be proved. If you have a tree which has had moss growing on it, pull some back and you will probably notice small feeder roots in or just below the moss. Now check a tree that has loose soil on top and you will not find any. As the sun intensifies, you may need more protection. Covering the soil with a medium weight cloth—like a towel will help during the hot periods of the day. If possible, maintain approximately 1” of air space between the towel and your soil. This added air space will act as an insulation barrier to the sun and heat. No matter if the towel is wet or dry, it will reduce the soil temperature and drastically slow down the evaporation of moisture from your soil.

Accent plantings. Most think of using accent plants only for a show. I like to have accent plants setting with my trees year round. And my wife really enjoys making them. Just as I like to keep my pots lightly oiled, I like to display each tree (when possible) just as it would be in a show. In a few cases, I even utilize some types of stands such as wood slabs or home made stands that have been treated for the weather and outdoor use. In the case of accent plants, my wife Barbara is great at growing all types of small dwarf and regular plants. In many cases, regular flowers or small plants can be used in small pots and they will actually remain smaller than if planted out. I have even seen the unusual such as dandelions being used. If you make a practice of using and growing several varieties and sizes, come show time, you will have several to choose from. The primary reason is to make your displays look as good as possible. It will not only make your trees stand out but, you will be proud of how everything looks.

Too much **density** on a tree makes it look more like a shrub than a tree. When pruning and thinning, do think about negative space. Leaving openings in the foliage not only allows in light and air but also helps display the nice details of the small twigs and branches. Remember, a bonsai is also a piece of art and you should enjoy the entire creation.

After styling a **juniper**, it is honestly best to allow the foliage to grow wild for one season so the tree can gain back its strength. Spray the foliage regularly with a nutrient of your choice. Junipers should also be placed in full sun about two weeks after styling so the foliage doesn't get weak or limp.

When using **raffia**, of course use it wet (I soak mine in warm water) and make each wrap from 4 or 5 strips tied together. Don't try to use one at a time since it will take much longer to apply and 4 or 5 together are much stronger. Tie them together at one end and then start wrapping.

The true test to see if a **Shohin** or even a **Mame** sized tree looks right is to review it in a photo. If it looks like a full size tree in the photo than you did a great job. Creating a shohin or smaller tree is a true test of your abilities and just as importantly, the tree itself.

I have recommended using white glue to **seal wound edges** when creating shari. I now hear from a reader that they have had good success using Vaseline. Sounds reasonable.

Remember, the water you use daily will dictate the **pH of your soil**. You can add additives to your soil but most will be washed out and the soil pH will return to that of your water.

Wiring—remember that a tree needs a healing time after a major wiring session. Typically the tree will incur internal injuries during wiring and the manipulation of the branches. In order for the tree to repair these injuries, the tree's metabolism must be active. Trees wired during a dormant period will not heal as well. As much as we need something to do during winter, try not to perform any major wiring until spring and do it just as the tree is waking up.

Tip from a reader: Having problem with **birds stealing your moss**? Add 3 or 4 drops of tabasco to a quart of water. Water your moss with this mixture and the birds will stay away. Tabasco is all natural and will not harm the tree or the moss.

Did You Slip Pot any trees? In some cases, whether it be because you were too late in the

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season, maybe didn't have the correct pot, maybe unfortunately, you broke the pot, or temporarily changing pots for a show, there may be the need to simply slip pot the occasional tree. This is fine as a temporary fix but, you must remember the soil around the edges will be different. As you water one of these trees, the water will have a tendency to run quickly down and through the outer edges where the new soil is. If you're not careful, the inner areas of the pot containing the harder soil or area of dense roots, will not become saturated with water. In the case of these trees, always watch the water soak in and water them two and three times in order to insure full saturation. It may also help to occasionally immerse the pot in a tub of water to insure total saturation.

Send me your tips, ideas and special techniques. As with most bonsai enthusiast, I thirst for new ideas to help me create and maintain my bonsai.

Send to absnewsletter@frontier.com

Prairie State Bonsai Society Show

The Prairie State Bonsai Society will host our annual show on the weekend of August 2nd and 3rd, 2014. The show takes place at the beautiful and world famous Morton Arboretum in Lisle Illinois, just west of Chicago. This year's show will be held in conjunction with the Morton Arboretum Asian Festival. As always the show will feature a display of bonsai from the private collections of our members. One tree, chosen by our guest masters, will be awarded as Best in Show. There will also be our popular People's Choice Award. Visitors to the show can vote for their favorite tree in the show and the winner, chosen by our visitors, will receive the People's Choice trophy.

This year our guest masters will be world renowned Walter Pall from Germany, Jim Doyle of Nature's Way Nursery in Pennsylvania, and Brian Ciskowski of Cass Bonsai in Edwardsville, Illinois. We will have bonsai demonstrations, performed by our guests as well as our own experienced members. There will also be bonsai workshops, again led by our guests and our own experienced members. We have some great material lined up for these workshops plus the chance to work with Walter Pall, Jim Doyle, and Brian Ciskowski.

The show also features a bonsai vendors area with a number of businesses selling trees and supplies. Society members are always available to answer questions and give advice.

The show is free with paid admission to the Arboretum. Plan to tour the Arboretum grounds during your visit. The Morton Arboretum is an internationally recognized nonprofit organization dedicated to the planting and conservation of trees. Its 1,700 acres hold more than 222,000 live plants representing nearly 4,300 taxa from around the world.

Situated on the rolling Valparaiso moraine and bisected by the East Branch of the DuPage River, The Morton Arboretum is planned and planted to nurture and display trees and shrubs in environments conducive to their growth.

The Arboretum offers extensive educational programming for all ages, conducts leading research on tree health and tree improvement, breeds and introduces hardy and disease-resistant trees and shrubs for distribution throughout the Midwest, and presents nature-related activities year-round for people of all ages and interests.

Also on the grounds are the Visitor Center and Plant Clinic, The Arboretum Store, Ginkgo Restaurant and Café, four-acre Children's Garden, one-acre Maze Garden, an environmentally-friendly parking lot, and a paved walking trail around restored Meadow Lake.

For further information about the show contact the Society at www.prairiestatebonsai.com. To sign up for workshops, or information about the Morton Arboretum go to www.mortonarboretum.com

Prairie State Bonsai Society Show

Show dates: Aug. 2-3, 2014

Location: Morton Arboretum, Lisle, IL

Hours: 10am-4pm both days

Events: Member's bonsai tree display, workshops, demos, vendors

Masters: Walter Pall, Germany, Jim Doyle, Nature's Way Nursery, Pennsylvania, Brian Ciskowski, Cass Bonsai, Illinois

Info: www.prairiestatebonsai.com

Contact: snipologist86@gmail.com