

BCI Diplomatic Mailbag - The Ambassador's newsletter:  
Communicating with BCI members around the World

2009

September  
Edition



BCI- Ambassador's  
Newsletter

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Editors Message

Hi to all

The Year is moving along quickly and it is amazing that 2010 and a new decade is just around the corner.

You would have all received the membership alert and I hope we are promoting BCI membership as this is the key to our continuing successes, a number of new initiatives will be announced shortly for BCI which I am sure will excite everyone.

Joan Greenway and Les Dowdell have started a Canada corner in the newsletter and am happy to include articles from all corners of the world.

It was great to see so many people at the New Orleans convention and as always this is an important part of the annual gathering.

Ian Glew – BCI Ambassadors Newsletter Editor : [iglew@b022.aone.net.au](mailto:iglew@b022.aone.net.au)

**What's in this issue?**

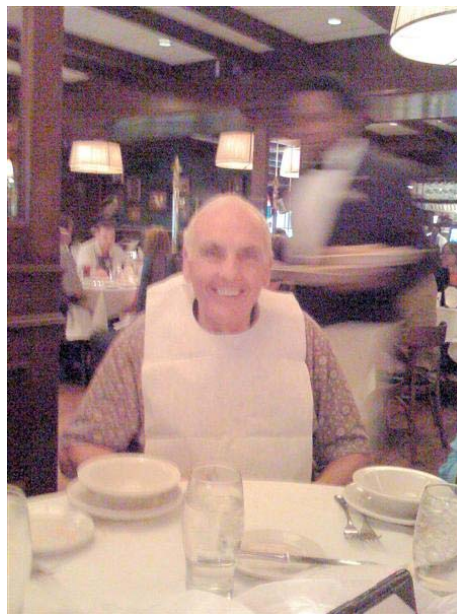
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**New Orleans June 2009**



Another fantastic c gathering fro the annual BCI convention, I have chosen not to include photos of the trees or instructors as these will appear in the magazine, but have included some photographs that will not make it to the magazine and shares some of the lighter side of the social aspect of the convention and the beautiful countryside. Thanks Dianne Boekhout from Western Australia for many of these photographs.





Who said accountants can't eat - Bring on those SHRIMPS!!  
(Sorry for the poor photograph but could not resist including this)

### **Canadian Corner – Joan Greenway and Les Dowdell**



What are some of the types of club activities that are better received and enjoyed by members? How critical is the number of members in a club to the range of activities that might be possible? Providing interesting club programs is an on-going challenge for most club executives as they try to balance the needs and interests of a wide range of members from beginners to experts. A popular activity in one club may not succeed at

another because of the number of members to be involved or different resources available. Leslie Dowdell, and myself, Joan Greenway, attending the recent BCI Convention in New Orleans learned much about our respective clubs activities and thought we should to try and encourage others to share as well. With the ideas and encouragement of Australian Director, Ian Glew, Les and I decided to contact other Canadian clubs in order to encourage the exchange of useful club activities through Ambassador's newsletter and would call it the "Canadian Corner."

For example, a club from Christchurch, New Zealand has had great success from making their own pots and had exciting results. Similarly, the potters in our Matsuyama club of Durham Region, Ontario have also given us lessons on how to make a slab/pinch pots and we agree, having potters in our groups has had surprising results. One of our Matsuyama's potters, Gay Liddell, has just won a juried show of pottery and will travel to Korea as part of the potter's prize. She had made mention of the bonsai pots in her declaration which may have helped to sway the judges. The work of our potters is also displayed during bonsai show opportunities held by the club.

Another popular idea with our members is our hosted, once-a-week workshops during the summer. Ours are held every Tuesday evening and are hosted in member's gardens. Sometimes they follow a theme. This year we started the evening with tool care so that our tools would be sharpened for the busy summer ahead. Evenings like these are easy in a small club where the hosts supply a few treats and drinks, larger clubs with over 50 members may have trouble finding hosts to manage a larger group.

In contrast, a smaller club, with limited funds for publicity, hall rental, and other costs may find it difficult to organize a Bonsai Show. For ten years, a privately owned Garden Centre, provided our Matsuyama club with \$200 for our yearly show in their grounds. Unfortunately they closed three years ago but we found a new location in the home of the founder of General Motors, R.S. McLaughlin, now a popular Oshawa museum. Our trees were displayed at no cost, but we were not allowed to charge an entrance fee, nor sell our bonsai. In the past two years about one hundred visitors came, however, this year we were fortunately combined with a local Peony and Literary Festival, and we had an amazing 982 visitors in two days. Yes, we had one patient member, counting our entrants! And because there was a government sponsorship we expect a small grant for the club.

Opportunities to display our trees can come from other partnerships. On another occasion, we combined a small show with a local Philharmonic Choir concert. As we sold tickets to support the concert, not only did we benefit from the show display but earned a small percentage for the club from ticket sales.

Have you ever styled a bonsai by committee? This was an activity suggested by Norman Haddrick of the Toronto Bonsai Society. We got a group together, styled a juniper then auctioned it. The group has fond memories of that afternoon and our club has quite an interest in that literati.

As a new director, the experience in New Orleans made me realize our bonsai club activities are very much related to our local environment and needs. For instance, people

who visited the auction table, were mystified when I started to talk about putting my trees "to bed" and the problems of my glasses "steaming up". Bonsai grow all year in New Orleans, whereas a major activity for us is protecting our trees from freezing -so we often bury the roots in our gardens -in their pots, and in a Canadian winter, glasses steam up when you go inside not outside.

I do hope we exchange more ideas about providing interesting club activities for our members and appreciate this opportunity to share.

Joan Greenway

Matsuyama Bonsai Society, Durham Region, Ontario. Canada.

## **Bonsai Potting Mix or – The real Dirt**

by Don Waitkus

*by Don Waitkus*

There are five "considerations" in the make-up of bonsai potting mixes: PARTICLE SIZE, TEXTURE, POTTING MIX COMPOSITION, MICRO-ORGANISMS, and AESTHETICS. The last article discussed the importance that particle size and texture play in constructing a suitable potting mix for your bonsai. We will begin this discussion with consideration number five.

### **CONSIDERATION 5: AESTHETICS**

Of less concern is the consideration of aesthetics. There is not much to discuss here, except that which is supposed to represent soil should at least look like soil. One of the problems with a bonsai mix is that too often it does not look like soil. It often has shiny particles showing up on the surface. The aggregate may be shiny and exposed pumice or perlite which shows up as a dull white. I suppose that this may be the best reason for planting moss in your bonsai pots. Some aggregate showing up is okay, but it should not dominate the scene. I don't advocate painting the mix, but you might consider a light dusting of the very fine soil that passed through the smallest strainer. The moss even seems to bond to this very nicely.

One author uses hemlock bark for part of the organic content of his mixes. Before use, he ages this material in a brew of steer and chicken manure for about a year, so that it turns a dark brown, nearly black color. I wonder if this would work on perlite or pumice. If you try this out, please let me know about the results and the smell. Also, be aware that aging in the presence of manure will have a tendency to change the fertilizer balance of your mix.

### **ORGANIC MATERIALS**

POTTING SOIL, HUMUS, COMPOSTED PEAT MOSS (not sphagnum), COMPOSTED MANURE (Black Kow is normally the cleanest) are all available locally, usually in five to fifty pound bags and inexpensive. These must be strained to provide the type of material you want for your mix. Most of these materials consist of mainly small particles, and, as a result, you will probably relegate about 60% to your compost pile or garden.

COMPOSTED MANURE has about a 0.5 content of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. I am now using a composted cow manure and shredded peat moss blend rather than potting soil, because of the added fertilizer benefit. I have found that Black

Kow and Hyponex are the cleanest over a period of time. The potting soil and cheaper manure's have a tendency to sprout up more weedlings while in storage. Another rep against potting soil is that there are so many large clumps of peat, twigs, bark, rocks and unidentified black clods. Quite often very fine sand has been added along with small quantities of perlite and/or foamed plastic.

*Beware of a product called RECYCLED SOIL.* It is expensive, contains many pieces of shredded plastic and starts to develop weedlings almost as soon as it is open. You will only get about 20% usable material from a fifty pound bag. The remainder consists of large matter which might even be rejected by your garden. It appears that this might be developed from the shredded compost currently available free from your local recycling center.

OAK LEAF MOLD and compressed or shredded PEAT MOSS are sometimes difficult to find and are somewhat expensive. The oak leaf mold does not require straining, but the compressed peat may require straining to remove excessively small particles after the bale is loosened up. These fine particles will tend to absorb the nitrogen and, in turn, nitrogen starve your plant.

PINE BARK or REDWOOD BARK is often available at numerous nursery outlets and is inexpensive. ORCHID POTTING BARK can also be used, although it is more expensive than the others. The orchid bark also comes in various sizes, of which the smallest (about 3/16") would be ideal. Small bags of shredded pine bark are sometimes available. If you have a chipper/shredder, you can develop your own landscape bark available from most nursery outlets.

#### **INORGANIC MATERIALS**

Coarse sand is available as SANDBLAST SAND or SILICA SAND from sources such as Home Depot, Scotty's or on special order from some hardware stores. Be aware that there is also a silicate product, which is sometimes called silica sand, that is used a desiccant (drying agent) to absorb excess moisture. It is blended with calcium chloride (salt) which can have an adverse effect on some plants.

Used sandblast sand is often repackaged and sold for homeowner consumption. This sand has already been broken down from its full size into smaller particles, which are mostly too fine for bonsai use.

Often available from the same sources are LAVA ROCK, PEA GRAVEL, RIVER GRAVEL, CRUSHED MARBLE, etc. You will have to shop for the right size. POOL FILTER SAND and RIVER SAND are generally too fine for bonsai. NEVER, AND I REPEAT, NEVER USE OCEAN BEACH SAND.

SOLITE is an inexpensive, manufactured, pelletized product of various sizes from dust to 3/4 inch. It is available from Florida Solite Corporation which is located on Clay County Road 209 toward Russell.

TURFACE is a manufactured, pelletized, calcined clay product. I do not know of any local sources for this product.

FEATHEROCK is available from Reed's Construction Supplies in Jacksonville. It comes in large pieces which you must break down to suitable size. Featherock has the best texture features, and its sharpness will hasten the process of root division.

CHICKEN/TURKEY GRIT is available from Standard Feed Stores.

BLACK BEAUTY SANDBLAST GRIT is a product developed from fly ash or industrial chimney waste products. It is black, very shiny and smooth until broken down by the action of blasting. I hesitate to recommend it, because it is so smooth and hard.

PUMICE is relatively new as a bonsai aggregate, but California bonsai enthusiasts have adopted it over anything else. In addition to being a very light weight material, the texture is only surpassed by featherrock, so root division is enhanced. Unfortunately, I am unaware of any local sources for pumice. I acquired some from a California cactus nursery, and, while it is inexpensive (about \$8.00 for a forty pound box), it cost \$24 for shipment to Florida.

### **FERTILIZERS AND AMENDMENTS**

If fertilizers are to be added to the organic mix, they should be limited to small quantities of bone meal, composted manure, blood meal, rape seed and/or cottonseed meal. These substances should be added after the other organic materials have been strained, but before they are blended with the inorganic materials. Any potting mix amendments such as gypsum, pH adjusters, etc. must be thoroughly blended into the organic batch mix before use.

As a starting point, it is suggested that to each gallon of blended organic and inorganic mix, you add four teaspoons of bonemeal (0-10-0), three teaspoons of gypsum and one teaspoon of super phosphate (0-15-0). As it is difficult to find gypsum locally, I substitute three teaspoons of horticultural limestone per gallon of mix. In addition to the bonemeal and super phosphate, I add four teaspoons of blood meal (12-0-0) or eight teaspoons of cottonseed meal (6-1-1) per gallon and blend thoroughly. These additions of organic nitrogen will help to offset the absorption of nitrogen by the decomposition of bark and will help the plant off to a good start. I prefer to use these substances, because they are solid organic materials. This fact enables them to last longer and have less of a tendency to migrate out of the potting mix.

### **pH CONTROL**

It is a good idea to occasionally check the pH of the blended bonsai mix to avoid extremes in acidity or alkalinity. As the soil mix is usually being prepared in smaller quantities, it is relatively simple to add lime or sulfated products to achieve the desired results. ***Know your plant!!*** I cannot overemphasize this important point. Be aware of the pH in which it normally lives. If you cannot find a chart of plant pH values, aim for a 6.0 to 6.5 pH for most common plant varieties. When you start working with tropical plants or plants like buttonwood, be aware that there is a tendency for some of these plants to prefer alkaline conditions.

### **STORAGE OF MATERIALS**

Once your organic and inorganic materials are strained, it is recommended that they be stored in containers that will keep them dry but in suitable working condition.

### **Part 5**

Now that we have discussed the what, where and why of bonsai potting mixes, let's turn our attention to the how. In this final installment we will talk about the actual preparation and control of your bonsai potting mixes.

### **POTTING MIX COMPOSITION**

It is possible to develop an infinite combination of organic materials once they have been strained and properly stored. However, I recommend that you establish a standard mixture of organic and inorganic materials as a base from which to work.

As many of you already know, in addition to my bonsai, I have an extensive collection of cacti and succulents. For many years I had made separate organic mixtures for both collections. After a while, I decided to make a general batch and add various additional components for each plant category. Unfortunately, this was still quite bulky, so I had to decide on what would give me the most value for my effort and reduce the

total volume of potting mixtures. I finally settled on the following *standard organic mixture*:

**60% composted cow manure**  
**30% shredded peat moss**  
**10% oak leaf mold**

I can then modify this standard mix by adding other organic components to suit the requirements of the various plant GROUPS (as covered in part 3). For example, you can add pine bark to this basic mix for conifers or more peat moss for azaleas. One way that I modify this basic mix is to add 30% pine bark and reduce the volume of the basic organic blend to 70%. In this way my basic organic blend remains consistent, which is an important feature in growing consistently healthy plants.

Next, for the *inorganic portion of my potting mixes* I have settled on the following standard mixture:

**30% pumice**  
**40% sharp silica sand**  
**30% Solite**

Finally, when potting time comes around, I simply determine what GROUP to which the plant belongs. I then mix the necessary amount of the standard or modified organic mix with the above inorganic mix to meet the specified organic/inorganic composition ratio for that specific plant group. Once you have the organic/inorganic ratio of the blend completed, you can add the required amendments and mix the entire batch thoroughly. Having completed this task you now have a completed bonsai potting mixture. You can make small or large batches using this method. In addition, you can custom blend as you need. Your basic organic and inorganic blends never have to change. And, as I stated earlier, consistency is an important feature in growing consistently healthy plants.

#### **IDENTIFICATION**

As a matter of personal control, it is a good idea to identify your specific blend formula with a permanent marker. You can write on the lid, attach a plastic tag to, or place a plastic bag in the container in which your mix is stored. This way you always have a permanent record of your mix along with any adjustments you may have made. You can wash off previous markings with lacquer thinner or acetone (nail polish remover).

#### **BATCH MIX CONTROL**

When you make a batch mix for potting, quite often you will have some potting mix left over after potting. Keep that in a separate covered container, properly identified. The next time you have to make up a bonsai mix, that leftover material can be incorporated with your new batch of the same plant GROUP.

This could mean that you might have five or more different GROUP ratio containers. Personally, I do not like that much material laying around. So, if the new batch to be made is of a relatively close ratio, and there isn't a lot of the leftover material, it is easier to blend that in with the new batch rather adding more containers.

#### **USED MATERIALS**

After repotting a number of plants, I save all the salvaged material in a separate container. At a later, more convenient time, I will strain out all the inorganic materials. The strained organic materials go into the compost pile or directly into the vegetable garden. The organic materials are placed into a bucket of water with one tablespoon of household bleach per gallon and allowed to soak for a few days. The water is poured off



into another container to soak dirty pots. Then, the inorganic materials are rinsed, drained of excess water, and allowed to dry for future use.

It isn't that I'm cheap (well, that's not completely true), but I've put too much time and effort into acquiring, straining, and blending that material to just throw it away. The organic materials are not live materials, and, for that reason, they are not natural disease carriers or pest havens. However, I do sterilize them anyway, just for good measure. I have several hundred plants of various types, so when I repot, there is usually quite a bit of old potting mix collected. The landfills are filling up fast enough without me adding these recyclable materials to them.

This concludes our discussion of bonsai potting mixes. I hope you have enjoyed this article and that the information contained in it will help you on your quest to develop the next American Masterpiece Bonsai.

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Adapted and reprinted with permission from **NFBC NEWS**, Newsletter of the North Florida Bonsai Club, Vol. 8, No. 4, April 1995, pp. 5-6, No. 5, May 1995, pp. 3-4, No. 6, June 1995, pp. 4-6.

### **Ambassadors Membership Alert**

You will all have received the membership alert and the opportunity for your club to receive a copy of the teachers Register free for your club if you sign up 15 members, this fantastic publication is valued at \$US150.00 and will form a valuable addition to your clubs library or make a fabulous raffle item. If you require any further details or assistance please don't hesitate to contact me.

As always the conventions are great places to meet old friends and make new ones and the inclusion of some food and coffee certainly brought out the ambassadors and delegates to the meeting – great to see you all there.



### **Closing and next Issue**

Next issue will feature the new arboretum that has been established in Australia's Capital – Canberra, see you then

