

BONSAI Techniques

The Greater New Orleans Bonsai Society

Regional / Area Bonsai Work Calendar

By Randy Bennett & Dawn Koetting

Editors Note: The following article and chart were developed by Randy Bennett and Dawn Koetting for one of our regular meetings. As many of you know, the timing of various tasks – like repotting varies drastically by region. Local information, especially by very experienced bonsai artists like Dawn and Randy, is invaluable.

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e have developed an Excel chart to provide guidelines based on our climate here and with the beginner or less experienced club member in mind. The resulting calendar is an attempt give you the best information for the most success, but like all things there are exceptions !

1. – yes, there will be others who take exception - Repotting Tropicals is listed in June, July and August. Some may choose to start in May, or if they have a greenhouse repot through September. But most of what is listed has been tailored “for the beginner and for best results”. So there will be times when you will see someone doing a procedure outside of the window shown. Is it a healthy tree, are they good at wiring without doing damage, is it a minimal repot, etc. etc. – these are some of the questions that may answer why it might work FOR THAT TREE AND ARTIST AT THAT TIME, but might not be the best when taken as an all encompassing statement to all trees and all people
2. - Every year is different. Just because the calendar says “repot deciduous trees in Feb and early March” doesn’t mean that an especially late, cold winter can’t set that back. Or an especially warm winter may move it into January. Or that you do the task regardless of the state of the tree.
3. – Ask the questions – it may be time to repot something, but does THAT tree need to be repotted. It may be a time that you can wire a tree, but if it is not growing well, or just got repotted, its not time FOR THAT TREE until it is stable. Does this branch need pruning? It may be time to prune, but I need more girth on that branch, so the answer is “no”. The exception is staying on top of organic fertilization and spraying for pests and diseases. Few reasons not to do those on a schedule.

The thing to remember is don’t just do for the sake of doing. Ask the questions. What is my purpose, where am I going with this tree, what is my design, what do I need to get

there, where is this tree in health or in development

- Answers will change depending on whether you are
- a) growing a trunk out
 - b) developing taper
 - c) developing main branches
 - d) developing an apex/canopy or tertiary twigging

So use the calendar as a tool, but know that exceptions will be made, and that not every tree needs every thing every year just because it is time. Always feel free to ask other more experienced club members about what has worked for them, but remember that things like watering schedules, soil, etc may be areas where they differ and it may affect whether their method works for YOU.

Repotting Schedule by species:

Many of us have a collection that consists of several species, and getting them all worked on in a short repotting window can be a challenge. Using the calendar suggestions should help, but repotting time can be especially problematic if you have many to do. Pine could be done in early February, but it is handy to do them in January and get them “out of the way”. Some species, like Juniper and many broadleaf evergreens, can be repotted earlier than this list, but their ability to be repotted later allows for more time sensitive trees to be done on time/early (cypress, trident maples).

The following is a list of commonly kept species and the approximate order in which they are ready to repot, taking the above into consideration: Pine, early budding deciduous, Azaleas, later budding deciduous, other broadleaf evergreens, earlier tropicals, heat/warm night requiring tropicals.

Pine
Chinese Elm, Bald Cypress, Trident Maple
Japanese Maples
Azaleas and camellias
Native elms and hornbeam, hawthorn
Most other broadleaf evergreens (boxwood, Yaupon, silverberry/eleagnus)

Junipers
Crepe Myrtles

As it warms – May - Jaboticaba,
June- Ficus
Bouganvillea
Nea
Heat loving – July - Buttonwood
Bahama Black Olive

Thoughts for Fall

What’s next level? Fall is a great time to make plans for next year. Not as crazy busy as spring so you are able to sit and ponder a bit. . .

What’s the “right” pot?

Michael Hagadorn recently posted about choosing a pot for a tree he had. He mentioned fall being a good time to do this work, as you can make decisions now and decide if you need to go pot shopping or not before February sneaks up on you. There are general pot selection rules.

1. - Unglazed especially for junipers and pines, but they are correct and can be used with any species including deciduous and tropical. Is the “Never Wrong” answer.
2. - Glazed are typically used for deciduous, flowering, and tropical type trees
3. - Harder edged, rectangle pots for “strong” or more masculine trees
4. - Softer edged, oval pots for more feminine curvy or “soft” trees.
5. - Shallow Rounds are normally used for Bunjin/Literati, but can be used for trees that have substantially round or large bases.
6. - Semi-cascade and cascade pots – pretty self explanatory!
7. - Color – to get attention we can use the complimentary color (opposite on the color wheel so gives contrast) of the thing that makes the tree special (blue pot with orange berries or leaves, green pot with red, purple hues with yellow, red or rust pot for tree with lots of green) or . . . for a quiet, subdued feeling, we may match trunk color, play off of the greens in the leaves, use earth tones to “ground” the composition or , use cream or blue to suggest coolness with a leafed out deciduous tree uh oh. . . we’re starting to use “or”

Like everything, its not always black and white. There are so many shades of gray. What happens when you have a very old, gnarly, flowering tree? Part of the answer is “what is the aspect of the tree that is most important, or that you want to highlight ?”

Also not every pot is simply masculine or feminine. There are stout, strong, simple rectangles, and there are ornate rectangles with cloud feet and indented corners that make them a bit more “feminine”. Maybe for that gnarly old flowering tree.

There are very simple, straight sided oval pots with flat

feet. Contrast that with an oval pot with a pronounced lip, maybe a lotus shape, and maybe biscuit, twisted or cloud feet.

So the entire pot needs to be assessed to determine its suitability to the tree, and any one tree can be displayed successfully in a number of pots. There are few absolute answers, but “better” or “different” answers. “Different” would include either complementing a component of the tree (like matching bark color to help it stand out) or contrasting the leaf or flower color for “pow”. An ornate oval may compliment a curvy tree, but a strong, simple rectangle can emphasize the complexity of a gnarly, deadwood filled trunk through contrast. So one of the best exercises you can do is take out a variety of pots – different shapes, glazed and unglazed, different colors of both, and set them in front of your tree to evaluate. Even if the size isn’t quite right, you can get an idea of style and color and if you don’t have the right size, go pot shopping! Realize during this exercise that there may be a couple possibilities that would work, but one may highlight one aspect of the tree differently than the other. Then it is personal preference as to what you want to really show off. One tree may benefit from 2 different color pots depending on the season it is shown.

Lastly, shohin trees require a little bit of a special pot selection. Shohin and mame, because of their tiny size, have trouble competing with larger trees in a show. For this reason they tend to be shown together in groups on a specially designed stand. Also, because of their size, we tend to pot them in showier, more colorful, more playful pots than many large trees. So when showing several trees together on a stand, we not only try to vary the species and style of each tree, but we strive to have each pot different in shape, glaze/unglazed, and color.

So, in the end, just like bonsai, you can never have enough pots. . . and each tree can actually be slipped into different pots depending on time of year and the attribute you want to show off.

Next Level

Every tree has a “next level”. No tree, as we say, is “finished” unless it is dead. So if we get a tree to a spot we like, and our goal is to keep it there, we are doomed. We may succeed for a while, but eventually we have to replace tops, remove branches, and find the better front that developed over the years while we weren’t looking! So there is always a next level.

One way to think of it is where the tree is physically. Lets start with trunk and nebari development. In the ground or large pot for trunk, move to flat grow trays or large bonsai pots for nebari and early branch development, into smaller bonsai pots for secondary and tertiary ramification and leaf reduction.

In other trees, it’s where the tree is aesthetically. Is it saying what you want it to say? Is it fighting to say what IT wants to say? Can you let go for a second and with a soft eye and in a quiet moment, see the best tree that this tree has to offer? Ryan Neil says look at 3 things. The best nebari, the best base, and the best trunk line. If they don’t all come from one viewing and trunk angle, what is the angle that gives you the best combination of the 3. Sacrifice a bit of line and nebari for a better flaring base. Then style the tree with that front and you will be producing the best tree that the material has to

offer. This works on nursery or bonsai stock as well as more developed trees that you feel may be lacking something. Grab a beer and think on it, spin the turntable, get some wedges, play with removing sections by covering with a towel. You may find that the tree is fine, it just needs more development with the present design – more ramification. Maybe removing redundant branches that have been held on to do a job but are not longer needed (simplify your statement). Or maybe, just maybe, you see something totally unexpected and need to make plans for a future style change (front change, angle change, pot change, etc.)

We constantly re-evaluate our trees every time we work on them, but seriously re-evaluate your individual trees every 1-2 years. We caution hobbyists not to overwork trees - let them grow and develop (get “hairy”). So once you’ve allowed that growth, use it to develop the tree you have, or look at what it gives you and don’t be afraid to use that growth to push in a different but better direction. Change is inevitable!

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
1	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec				
2	Repotting - full															
3	Deciduous (as buds swell)	x	XX	X early	c. myrtle											X = yes
4	Broadleaf Evergreen	X	X - azalea	X- azalea	X											XX = YES!
5	Pine	XX	X													x = yes, but with care
6	Juniper (not w/ hard prune)	X	X	X								x-lite	x - lite			! = special care
7	Tropical					x	XX	XX	XX							
8																
9	Pruning															
10	Deciduous	XX	XX	X	x trim hardened	x						x - late Sept/early Oct - lite.	New growth must harden before winter			
11	Broadleaf Evergreen	X	XX	XX	X					X	X					
12	Pine						Candles					X - branch	X - branch			
13	Juniper (not with repot)	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X			
14	Tropicals					X	XX	XX	X							
15																
16	Wiring (structural/hard)															
17	Deciduous	x!	x!	x!	w/ defol	w/ defol	x	x	x	X	X	XX	XX			
18	Warning - while it is nice (and OK) to wire in spring, rapid growth at this time means frequent checks for removal -															
19	wiring when the growth is slower helps with "cut in" and scarred branches															
20	Broadleaf Evergreen	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X			
21	Pine	X									X	XX	XX			
22	Juniper	X	! Avoid serious bends !			X	X			X	X	XX	XX			
23	! - Ryan Neil suggests checking juniper branches - if the bark strips easily (check on a pruned branch), you may lose branches if bent too much. Wait past spring, generally May for us															
24	Tropicals (! = Watch cut in due to rapid growth)				X! w/def	X! w/def	X! w/def	X! w/def	X	X	X					
25																
26	Wiring (fine/minor) - can be done virtually all year as long as you can see what you are doing, being careful not to damage branches or foliage, and can include guy wires.															
27																
28		Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec			
29	Air Layer Decid/broadleaf EG	X	X	X	X	X	X	x	x	take off before fall or protect from freeze						
30	Tropical					X	X	X	x							
31																
32	Thread Graft Decid/BLEG	X	X	X	X	X	X									
33	Tropical					X	X	X	X							
34																
35	Defoliate Deciduous (healthy)															
36	can be partial - 1/2 leaves or take off large and outer leaves to allow light to inside.															
37	Defoliate Tropicals (esp. to wire)															
38	Prune tips of branches as well to encourage back budding															
39																
40	Fertilize - Organics preferred due to healthier tree, disease resistance, stronger growth with smaller internodes, better for the soil microbes, doesn't acidify the soil															
41	Deciduous/Broadleaf EG		X	XX	XX	XX	X	x	x	X	X	x				
42										Lower nitrogen fert. In fall						
43	Pine/Juniper	x	X	XX	XX	XX	X	x	x	X	X	x	x			
44	Tropicals	?	x	X	X	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX	x	x	?			
45										If greenhoused, you can con't light feed						
46																
47	Spray - Year Round every 1-2 mo															
48	Decid Insects / fungus	3 in 1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
49	Elms - fungus single systemic or 3 ir	3 in 1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
50	Cypress - root aphids			acephate	drench	X	X	X	X							
51	Azaleas - thrips	3 in 1	X	X	XX	XX	XX	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
52	Pine - needle cast fungus	3 in 1	copper	3 in 1	copper	3 in 1	copper	3 in 1	copper	3 in 1	copper	3 in 1	copper			
53	Juniper - spider mites systemic gran or 3/1			X	XX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XX	X					
54																
55	can/should alternate 3-1 with spinosad (organic) and neem oil, especially with elms - Bayer 3-1 can abnormally reduce leaf size															
56																

