

IJA News & Muse
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MARCH ACTIVITIES

MARCH 16, 6 PM, DES MOINES MEETING
RENEW, REFRESH, REVITALIZE - Each tree in the Botanical Center collection will be analyzed and plans made for it's future. The club commitment to the Botanical Center bonsai collection will be refreshed and renewed. Some trees may be repotted.

Come early if you can and bring tools. This will be a great learning experience both in learning about bonsai design and care and hands on repotting experience.

We will meet in the work corridor by the greenhouses. Park at the back of the main parking lot and come to the back door.

EIBA NEWS AND CALENDAR

EIBA held its February meeting at our new location, Pierson's Flower Shop, and the response of members was very positive. This looks like a good relationship for both our club and Pierson's. Club soil was mixed and handed out, so members should be ready for repotting season. The recent sunny and warm temps has us all excited to work on our trees!

March 9 Board Mtg Panera 6:30
March 18 Club Meeting, Piersons, 7 pm "Soil and Repotting" and Black Pines
April 1 Board Mtg Panera 6:30
April 18 Club Mtg, Chris Burr residence 7 pm "Ground and Air Layering demo"
August 7 Matt Ouwinga Demo and Workshop

Do not condemn the judgment of another because it differs from your own. You may both be wrong. - Dandamis, sage (4c BCE)

TIMELY TIPS

It looks like spring may really come after all. The days are definitely longer and I am seeing new growth on my Fukien Tea tree which has just been sitting near a window, not under lights. I have also seen a hint of new buds on one of my deciduous trees. That is a sure sign that repotting time is at hand. My fingers have been itching to get started. Deciduous trees are usually the first to show signs of growth so are usually the first to be repotted.

Take your time repotting, make sure you are happy with the placement of the tree. It is usually best to put it a bit to the side and back of center but the shape of the tree should dictate that. Also check the pot and be sure you have selected the front you want and small defects are hidden. Place the tree on a small pile of soil so it isn't sitting directly on the bottom of the pot.

The next step is to tie it in securely with wire. You should be able to pick up the tree by the trunk and have no movement. I don't really recommend that, but it should be that secure. If wire alone won't do the job a few pieces of chopsticks placed over the roots and wired down should do it. It is important that the tree not move so that the fine new roots are not torn and broken.

Work the soil around the roots carefully by jiggling it with a chopstick. Don't jab with the stick or you can break the roots. Water it well until clear water runs out the bottom. That will get rid of dust and small particles and allow for oxygen to get to the roots. Put the tree in a protected place and mist it frequently.

It may be a while before we can put our trees outside, I still have a couple of feet of snow where I keep my trees outside but it won't be long. Introduce trees to sun gradually so you don't get burned foliage.

Great thoughts reduced to practice become great acts. -William Hazlitt, essayist (1778-1830)

BONSAI SOIL

Helene Magruder

It has often been said that there are as many recipes for bonsai soil mix as there are people practicing bonsai. I think everyone agrees, however, that good bonsai soil must act as a vehicle to provide water and nutrients to the tree, oxygen for the roots and good drainage. Regional climatic conditions dictate certain differences in the choice of ingredients. Hot and dry climates require more moisture retention where rainy and damp climates require better drainage. Certain varieties of trees grow better with more acidity in the soil while some trees prefer a neutral or slightly alkaline PH.

Some bonsai experts use the same soil mix for all their trees while others tailor the mix to the tree. So where does that leave us? How do we choose a soil mix that is right for us? What ingredients will give us the desired results?

It is a good idea to be familiar with some of the ingredients that go into a good bonsai soil mix. Many of the books talk about using garden soil, mulch, loam or other "found" ingredients. Newer books and magazine articles are more specific about ingredients.

Probably the most universal ingredient is crushed lava rock. Many soil mixes consist of about 1/3 lava. It has several properties that make it desirable. It is sharp, prickly and has little cavities in it. These provide moderate water retention, oxygen for the roots (that seems almost contradictory but it's true) and the sharp surface causes the new roots to split and develop the fine root hairs we desire. Lava also provides good drainage because it will not decompose and pack down.

Akadama is also a classic ingredient for bonsai soil. It has good water retention and is relatively neutral in PH. It is the choice of the Japanese bonsai masters because trees do well in it. However, it is imported to the US and therefore is expensive. Akadama is a low fired clay material. There are other substances that can be successfully substituted for Akadama. One which is locally available is Turface (D&K Turf Products, 515-262-9352). It has many of the same qualities as Akadama, similar water retention and it looks somewhat similar. Haydite works quite well but requires a trip to St. Joseph, MO. In a pinch you can use kitty litter if you can find some that hasn't been treated with chemicals. I don't know what they put in it to make it clump but I would avoid it. Some of it is treated with baking soda to mask odors but I would think that would cause an alkaline PH. Oil Dri has

been used with some success. I checked it on Google and it is made of Fullers Earth, a kind of Bentonite which is a form of clay. They claim there are no chemicals added and they even make a couple of Kitty Litter products.

The third type of basic ingredient for bonsai soil is pumice. Pumice is also a form of lava. It is kind of a lava froth. It is very light weight and full of air pockets. It provides good drainage and oxygen. Hyuga is a pumice imported from Japan. It is very desirable as it is tan and blends with the soil well. It is also expensive. The most common form of pumice and the most available is Perlite. It has several drawbacks. It is bright white and it tends to float to the surface when soil is watered. A very coarse sand or chicken grit is a good substitute. Use only builders sand, not sand collected from a beach as it would contain a lot of salt. Drystall, a horse bedding or horticultural pumice, works very well if you can find it.

Organic ingredients are often used although many people use a bonsai soil mix with no organic material in it. Organic ingredients would include sphagnum peat moss, fir bark or pine bark. It is not a good idea to use peat moss as it either holds too much moisture or dries out and does not absorb moisture unless soaked. Organic ingredients will break down over time and can cause decreased drainage and soggy soil. They can also rob roots of nitrogen as they use it in the decomposition process. Some finely shredded sphagnum peat moss sprinkled over the soil does a nice job of helping to retain moisture.

Deborah Koreshoff says that soil should be 1/2 solid matter and 1/2 porous spaces. She defines porous spaces as consisting "of soil air and soil water : the later existing as a fine film around the particles of solid matter." " In a good soil, the water quickly drains away till about half of the pore spaces are filled, from which time the drying process is slower, and the trees begin to take full benefit of the moisture." I like this description as it is easy to visualize the process.

John Naka suggests making your own soil from organic fertilizer, garden soil, sand and compost. This should age in a brick lined pit for several months with applications of boiling water and an insecticide. Most of us don't have the facilities for such a venture, much less the time and inclination. All garden soil is not the same either. It can have a wide variety of ingredients such as heavy clay, sand composted manure etc, as well as unknown chemicals. We live in a time when soil ingredients can be purchased in handy bags and we know pretty much what is in it. We can mix ingredients to our own specifications and needs.

Doug Hawley and Tom McCormack interviewed several bonsai artists around the country for their article on bonsai soil in the Journal of the American Bonsai Society.

Erik Wigert of North Fort Meyers, FL (zone 10) uses lava rock, Turface and pine bark in equal parts by volume, sifted to 1/4 to 1/8 inch particle size.

Ted Matson of Pasadena, CA (zone 9) uses 1/3 each Drystall, scoria (a type of lava rock aka cinder) and "Calidama"/akadama, using different size particles depending on the tree, smaller particles for more moisture loving plants.

Boon Manikitivipart of the San Francisco area (zone 8) uses "1 part lava rock, 1 part pumice, 1 part akadama, per 5 gallons." He also adds 1 cup crushed granite and 1 cup horticultural charcoal. He uses different size particles depending on the tree.

David deGroot of the Seattle, WA area (zone 8 and wet) uses about 1/3 akadama and 2/3 pumice for dry loving conifers and equal parts akadama, pumice and lava with 5% charcoal for large pots and 50% akadama, and 50% pumice (or 25% pumice and 25% lava) with 5% charcoal for deciduous and moisture loving conifers.

Pauline Muth of West Charlton, NY (zone 5) uses a mixture of 1 part Turface, 1 part crushed rock and 1 part well sifted small bark.

So there you have it. There are a lot of similarities in all the mixes with differences according to climactic conditions, availability of ingredients and type of tree. I can only add that we are very fortunate to have a vendor right here at home (Dave Lowman) who makes and sells his own mix which I have used very successfully.

It is most important to sift bonsai soil mix of any kind to get rid of dust particles. These can quickly cause soil to clog and lose good drainage. Soil should be sifted through a variety of screen sizes so you can remove particles that are too large as well as dust.

There are such numerous discussions about chemical and physical processes involved in mixing the proper soil that it can make your head spin. I don't know how important it is to understand all of these theories and processes. "Obviously the specialist's work has its place but, in the process of gaining knowledge, we should not lose the special feeling and love for Nature that allows us to pick up a handful of

soil and 'know' whether or not our trees will grow in it." Deborah Koreshoff .

Sources: "Bonsai, Its Art, Science, History and Philosophy" by Deborah Koreshoff
"Bonsai Techniques I" by John Naka
"Bonsai Soil" by Doug Hawley and Tom McCormack in the "Journal of the American Bonsai Society" Volume 43, #4, 2009

Why go to a bonsai convention, anyway?

Late last year, I started talking up the MABA2010 convention, trying to persuade as many as possible of our local members to attend. A question from one lady stopped me in my tracks for a moment. The gist was: I don't have much bonsai experience; wouldn't things at a convention be over my head? So what point would there be to my going?

That rocked me a bit! As I considered her question, I realized that I had not mentioned the great difference my own first convention made to me. My first bonsai convention resulted in a "quantum leap" in my bonsai knowledge, enjoyment, and confidence. (I really don't like clichés, but occasionally a cliché does actually say it best.)

The first convention I attended was the 1992 American Bonsai Society Symposium, hosted by the Susquehanna Bonsai Society and held in Hershey, PA. Even tho I had acquired my first tree (a serissa) 2-1/2 years before, I was still very much a beginner, learning as best I could from books and journals. My work schedule at the time kept me from involvement in any bonsai club.

How did the symposium result in a "quantum leap?" Let me give you some specifics.

First, learning, learning, learning! Opportunities to learn were all around me:

Demonstrations. I saw Bruce Baker, of Ann Arbor, MI, start out with an unkempt-looking collected yew that I, frankly, thought was quite boring, and transform it into a masterpiece. The work took two days, most of it off in a side room; but when Bruce was finished I was very much impressed by the result! I learned how a potter creates an oval pot on a round potter's wheel by watching Max Braverman do it. (He threw a round pot, then cut a leaf-shaped section out of the center and carefully squeezed the sides in to close the gap.) And I grasped some techniques that I had not yet understood from reading, by seeing them done.

Workshops are of course an excellent chance to learn, as many of you already know. I didn't take any in Hershey, but I was a silent observer in one or two, and even observing I learned quite a bit.

Exhibit Critiques. I took one critique at ABS '92, and have been convinced of their value ever since! Vaughn Banting, of New Orleans, led a dozen of us thru the convention exhibit, explaining what he found good and not-so-good about each tree. I know I learned more in that one hour than in any other four hours that weekend! Vaughn, by the way, had an encouraging way of referring to a bonsai's "dilemmas" rather than its "problems."

Private conversations. Within half an hour of checking in I found myself welcomed to listen in as a serissa's owner discussed design options with a teacher. Several times during the weekend I stopped one teacher or another in the hall, to ask (politely) if he would mind answering a question. My questions then were kindergarten level, but only one man blew me off.

Vaughn Banting was the most helpful of all. After courteously listening to a design dilemma that had me stumped, Vaughn sat down with me on a nearby bench. Taking the

pad on which I'd sketched out my problem, he in turn sketched a simple, fairly elegant solution, which was well within my abilities at the time. When I protested that his suggestion broke a basic design rule, he explained that this was a valid exception. ("A major branch may cross the trunk, if the tree is a windswept.") It has always seemed to me that the best way to show my appreciation for the helpfulness of Vaughn, and others, is by passing it on. Vaughn died in October 2008, and since then it has also seemed the best way to honor his memory.

Second, inspiration! Pictures can be very useful, but nothing compares with being able to see a bonsai directly: you can look at it from different angles, from closer or farther away; you can see more detail, more nuance. I went thru the bonsai exhibit in Hershey at least three times by myself, studying the trees, finding new details, new insights. Several times I bent down to put my eyes about at the level of the nebari, and looked up into the branch structure.

Sometime during ABS '92, I'm sure, is when I started saying to myself, "I didn't know you could do that," in mingled surprise and delight. After 18 years, I still say it from time to time.

What sorts of insights can you gain from studying good bonsai?

Species. Would you expect English ivy, or giant sequoia, to make a good bonsai? A convention display is a good place to expand your horizons about species you may not have considered before.

Style and color matches. Sometimes we don't realize that a certain style will work well for a given species, until we see an example. The same is true for pot colors and the foliage, fruit, or bark of different trees. **Ways to handle dilemmas.** One of the trees in the Hershey exhibit had a major trunk-

chop wound that was far from being completely closed. The artist put the wound to the rear, and grew a new leader directly in front of it, to conceal it. It was the first time I had seen that. Seeing how others have handled design dilemmas can give us ideas for dealing with the challenges our own trees present.

Third, community. This benefit is intangible, but it is very real. Paul Weishaar, President of MABA, approaches this concept from an angle that hadn't occurred to me, in his current "President's Message." Rather than appear to compete with him, I'll just ask you to read his second paragraph, beginning with, "As I write this I cannot help but think of our bonsai community ..." (You'll find this on the MABA website: mababonsai.org.)

Finally, let me leave you with a 9-year-old's perspective. I asked my daughter what she would say on this point, as I was getting ready to write. I'll quote her answer as closely as I can: When you go to a convention, you learn a lot about bonsai, and then you find you have a hobby that you will enjoy for the rest of your life!

-- Steve Moore, MABA Vice-President;
Warsaw, IN
Fort Wayne Bonsai Club

This article is adapted from the February 2010 Stuff from Steve, a column in the Fort Wayne Bonsai Club monthly newsletter.

I have attended a number of MABA conventions and plan to go again this year. Like Steve, I can highly recommend them. Attached is all the information about the convention along with the registration form.

One thing that Steve didn't mention is the people you meet. Everyone has the same

interest so it is easy to meet and enjoy the other participants. It is a lot of fun. Ed.

ggggggggggy - that was written by my co-editor, Max the cat. He is very helpful and he has very definite opinions. He also prunes my trees occasionally. Meet Max.



The animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren; they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth. -Henry Beston, naturalist and author (1888-1968)