

## Spring in the Bonsai Garden

When you read this article spring will be just around the corner, hopefully. This is a busy time for bonsai growers and it pays to be just a little prepared. This is the best time of year for repotting most tree species. I will already have a couple of buckets of potting soil ready. I also have a "game plan" of sorts because I have been keeping a small selection of pots ready for specific trees. This year I am going to get all of my trees out of the black bags and basins that they have been growing in for a few years and plant them into good pots in order to display them at the 2011 African Bonsai Convention that will be held in Durban in September of that year. I am doing it about three years ahead of time because that is how long it takes most trees to show the benefits of being restricted by a small soil area.

Timing of repotting is quite important, especially if you live in an area that experiences extreme temperature fluctuations. The time to repot a tree is determined by the development of the buds. It is also important to realize that I am talking purely about deciduous trees, those that lose their leaves in winter. As a tree emerges from its winter sleep the buds will begin to swell. Most trees do this, but it is more noticeable in trees such as the acacia. As the brand new leaves begin to poke their heads out, this is when one should repot. If done at this time the tree will hardly even notice that it has a new home, and the new soil you have added will give it an extra boost.

I have written a lot in the past about some of the dos and don'ts of repotting and I won't repeat myself here, suffice to say that repotting is actually a very simple process. Don't water the plant for a couple of days before so that the soil is fairly dry. Loosen the soil around the edges of the old pot with something like a butter knife and lift the tree gently out. Don't break any root tips. Remove as much of the old soil around the root ball as possible, comb the roots out a bit like combing hair and then snip the ends of the fine root hairs. Place an appropriate amount of new soil in your new pot, position the tree and place new soil around the tree to finish the job. Try and remove any larger air gaps from the soil by wiggling a stick around in the soil. Some people tap the side of the pot with a small rubber mallet to shake the soil into those hard-to-get-to places. Now soak the pot gently but thoroughly with water and then place the tree in shade for a couple of weeks.

The first set of new leaves will be quite large because of the renewed vigor that comes from the new soil and root trimming. The new shoots will also tend to grow very fast over the spring period, and if not controlled they can get out of hand very easily. Any extra growth on a bonsai that is going to be removed is really just wasted nutrients, and the time it took to grow these extra bits is time that could have been used to develop parts of the tree that will remain.

Shoots that grow quickly and vigorously have widely spaced nodes. The first leaves, or sets of compound leaves, on a shoot will be the largest. Allow the shoot to grow to about three nodes in length and then snip the end or apex. The shoot will now stop growing in length, and the nutrients that would have been used to create that length will collect near the nodes and after a couple of weeks new shoots will form at these nodes. Let these new shoots develop to two or three nodes and snip the ends once again. This process gets repeated constantly, more often during spring and less frequently as the speed of growth slows down during summer. As more and more leaves develop they will get smaller. Remove the larger leaves either by pinching them off with the fingers or snipping them off with pruning tools.

Resist the temptation to feed the newly potted trees too early. They should not need fertilizer for a couple of months because they will be using the nutrients in the new soil. When applying fertilizer take care. Strong fertilizer can burn young leaves and shoots very easily. I always use plant food at half of the advised strength just to be sure. Never apply plant food in the midday heat, and always wet the plants first before applying.