

IBA News & Muse
Iowa Bonsai Association Newsletter
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IBA FEBRUARY Activities

Tuesday, February 17, 7:00pm, IBA Meeting
Des Moines Botanical Garden, 909 Robert D. Ray Drive,
Botany Lab

Ivan Hanthorn will lead a discussion on Pot Selection. Members are asked to bring a tree or a photo and measurements to explore the possibilities of the best pot for the tree. Bring your project tree. Find out sources for pots.

EIBA FEBRUARY Activities

February 12, 2015 6 pm. Board mtg at Nothing But Noodles Restaurant

February 19, 2015 7 pm Club Meeting at Pierson's Flower Shop on Ellis Blvd

Topics: Pay dues, hand out club soil, discuss 2015 Calendar events, discuss taking trees out of winter storage.

February 21, 2015 8:30 am to 4:30 pm. Winter Gardening Fair at Kirkwood CC.

John Clemens of EIBA will present "Practical Bonsai".

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Roan Mountain landscape from North Carolina Arboretum bonsai collection.



A nice Japanese landscape painted on a small pot

Timely Tips

In February temps can warm up. If you over winter your trees in your garage or a cold room, make sure your trees are getting enough water and not drying out. Stick your finger in the soil to test for moisture or place a dry chopstick into the soil and leave it there. Check it later and note the degree of dampness. If it is wet, your soil is wet, do not water. But, if the chopstick remains dry or only very slightly damp, it is time to water. Water until you see water dripping from the drainage holes. I will water all my trees, then come back a second time and add a bit more water to make sure the soil is completely and uniformly wet.

Also, with warmth comes insect and disease activity. Garages can be damp and that invites disease, as well. I have seen mite activity on procumbans in late February. Check your trees over carefully for issues.

February is also a key time to prepare for repotting. Many bonsai hobbyists will have trees ready for repotting in early March. Make sure you have all the soil, pots, tools, supplies you need for the job. Figure out which trees need new pots and shop for them. I just bought several from Dasu Bonsai. You can shop online at places like Stone Lantern, Brussels, Dallas Bonsai, Hollow Creek, Bonsai Vision, Sara Raynor, Lang, etc.

Make sure you have drainage screen, 2mm aluminum wire for tying in, soil, spaghnum moss, chopsticks. Owning a pair of cheaper or older used scissors for root work is helpful. Keep your best scissors away from the soil and they will last longer and prune better. Having a sieve set is very helpful. To do the job right, be a Boy Scout and be prepared!

Another thing to consider prior to repotting is finding the best front and angle of inclination for your tree. You can always repot your tree the same as it was before. But, you might have a much better front available or a more dynamic angle coming out of the soil. Look for it!

Repotting time is a great time. Spring is coming soon. Dig in the dirt. Pot your trees up in fresh soil, a new front, a new pot. Have fun!!

How Do I Know When it is Time to Repot My Tree?

John Denny



A black pine by Morten Albek with a broken pot showing the root mass is ready to be repotted.

This is a question we ask ourselves annually every spring and we ask it regarding about half of our bonsai tree collection. It is a simple question, is it not? But the answer can be very complex. There are so many factors involved in deciding whether a tree needs repotting. Do not expect a simple straight forward definitive answer from me. I will, however, offer help with the thought process required to answer the question for you and your tree.

Sometimes it is easiest to know when NOT to repot a tree. If your tree is healthy, growing well, accepts and drains water easily, then leave the tree alone and ask again next year whether your tree should be repotted. I have a tendency to repot a bit too often. Many of the top bonsai people think in terms of every three years. However, do not repot just because your timetable says, "It's time!". There should always be a reason you are repotting. Repotting is stressful to a tree. Removing soil, cutting roots, adding all new soil will slow down the growth of your tree for a few weeks. Why add risk to your tree if there is not a good reason to repot?

Now, what **are** some good reasons to repot a bonsai?

1. Your tree's growth and activity has slowed down and it has been a couple of years or more since you have repotted. This is especially true if your tree is in poor soil.
2. Water does not penetrate the surface of your soil easily. Water should not pool up or run off the top of your soil. Add some water and watch it soak in. It should do so within seconds.
3. Water does not drain from your soil freely.
4. Your soil does not dry out as quickly as it used to. If the top surface is still wet the next day you have issues. If you suspect root rot, deal with it quickly which often means repot quickly.
5. You cannot push a chopstick into the root ball easily due to packing of roots and breakdown and compaction of soil. If your chopstick cannot get into your soil, neither will water and air easily enter.
6. Your tree is new to you and has soil that is not your soil mix ie native soil or nursery soil. Put it in new soil so you know what soil it is in. You know how that soil behaves when watering. With pines, you should only replace about half of the old soil at a repotting. Do not bare root conifers.
7. How old is your tree? Younger trees usually require more frequent repotting. Mature bonsai, not so often.
8. What species is your tree? Tropicals may require annual repotting. Pines can go 3-5 years. Deciduous somewhere in between.
9. You have a wonderful new pot for your tree and you think the tree maybe needs repotting, but you are not sure, well go for it. Get your tree into an appropriate sized pot, not too big, not too small.
10. You want to restyle your tree and give it a new front or a new angle of inclination. If your tree definitely is not ready to repot, simply mark the new front and angle and wait another year. If your tree maybe needs repotting, then go ahead and repot to your new front and new angle.

Good soil and repotting can make all the difference to your tree. But, again, do not repot just to repot. Have a solid reason for why your tree needs repotting. If your tree is doing fine and the soil is functioning well, do your tree a favor and allow it to remain strong and happy in its current soil and container.

But, if you suspect your tree and its soil meet some of the above conditions, then repot. Use the best soil you can, root prune appropriately though not too aggressively, tie your tree in well, keep it away from strong spring winds, do not fertilize for 3 or 4 weeks. Then your tree should really begin to push new growth. Your tree should be happy and beautiful for a long time in its new environment – enjoy it!



A beautiful pine by Mario Komsta. Love the pot, too!

BONSAI BOOK REVIEW: Bonsai—Crespi Bonsai Museum

By Ivan Hanthorn

This morning I looked outside to see a seven inch blanket of perfect crystal white new-fallen snow. I had just arisen so my first thought was coffee—hot black coffee. My next thought was that this would be a perfect winter day for book reading. I had acquired the Crespi Bonsai Museum book from Stone Lantern when they first listed it in November, but had not spent much time with it. Today was the day.

Stone Lantern's précis is good and to the point, so it follows herewith. "A luscious journey through the remarkable bonsai trees from the world famous Crespi Bonsai Museum in Milan Italy. It has been a long time since we've seen a new bonsai gallery book this beautiful. Especially considering the price (you would expect to pay at least another \$20.00 to \$30.00 for a hardcover book of this high quality and size). Features 208 pages of perfectly photographed bonsai in all their full color glory. Photographs by Fabio Petroni. Text by Anna Maria Botticelli. Preface by Luigi and Susanna Crespi."

Most Americans would not know of the Crespi Bonsai Museum, but the internet now brings the world to our laptops. The main page of the website for the Crespi tells us the following:

Opened in 1991, this museum is fruit of the passion and thirty-year commitment of Luigi Crespi. A permanent museum unique in the world, it originated from the willingness to offer to all those with an interest in bonsai the opportunity to admire a precious collection that includes centuries-old plants, antique pots and books and manuscripts from the Far East.

The masterpiece of the collection is the millennial *Ficus retusa linn*, placed at the centre of a pagoda between two nineteenth-century wooden Chinese temple dogs.

On a table of solid slate are displayed numerous other authentic specimens, many well over a hundred years old and trained by famous Japanese masters, among which are the works of Kato, Kawamoto, Kawahara and Ogasawara.

The collection of bonsai containers includes antique Chinese containers from the Ming and Ching dynasties. Of extreme value also is the library that houses both antique and modern volumes, precious incunabula and rare texts from all over the world.

A place of importance is occupied by a reconstruction of the "*tokonoma*" in the corner, which in every Japanese house is set-aside for the displaying of objects of spiritual significance.

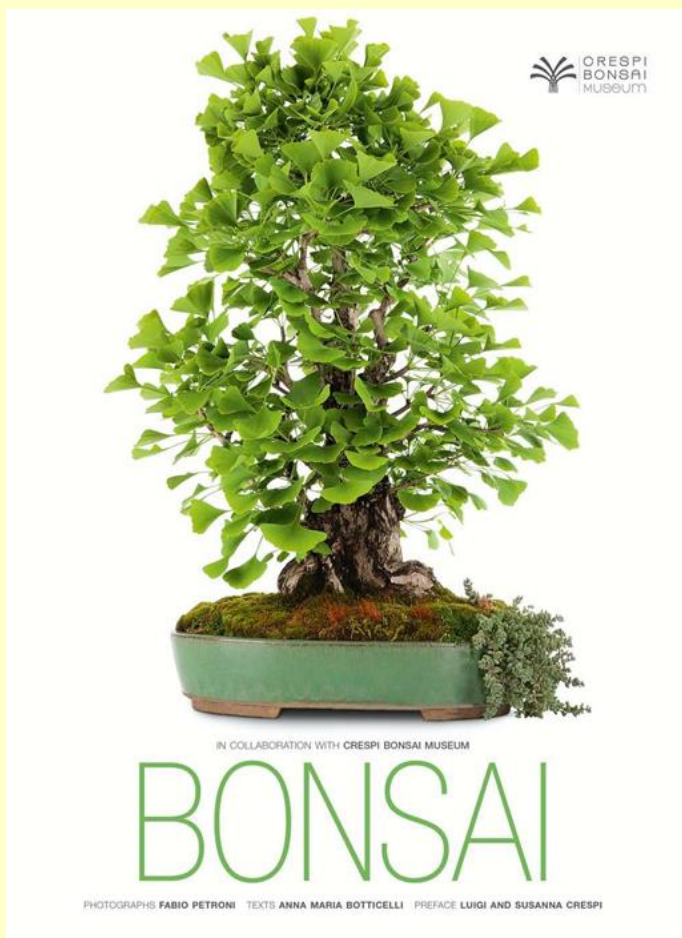
This beautiful collection is tastefully complemented with authentic furnishings among which are antique Japanese lamps.

The website does not tell one a great deal about the bonsai collection. However, the book in hand does so very well. This 10.3" x 13.7" hardcover book is a true treasure of beautify bonsai. It was published in October 2014.

Although I obtained my copy from Stone Lantern only a short while ago, it currently is not listed on their books available for sale list. However, **Bonsai—Crespi Bonsai Museum** is now available on Amazon for \$32.18. (List price is \$45.) The Amazon précis suggests the visual lyricism achieved by the photographer, so it follows.

These spectacular images will transport you to a garden filled with the finest miniature plants. Fabio Petroni's vivid photographs capture 30 specially chosen bonsai close up and in surprising detail as they change with each passing season. You'll see as never before the grace of their outlines, the strength of the buds as they prepare to open, the mysterious design of the bark, the power of the roots, the delicacy of the flowers, and the perfection of every leaf.

My primary reaction to this book is visual. Excellent bonsai very well photographed. But underlying this visual revel is the consciousness of the museum setting so thoroughly embedded in all aspects of this volume, which describes a collection of living art objects that are presented to the public in the museum setting that all great art deserves. The photographs themselves are only of the bonsai, the tree in its pot, or of details. No table, no background. The art object itself in its glorious detail. Sixty photographs detail a specific museum collection of bonsai. A summary statement of a collector's passion and a curatorial view of presentation and appreciation. A great bonsai photograph book to enjoy at any time, but particularly on a cold winter day when one entertains thoughts of the next season being prepared under the white blanket of winter snow.



Historical Bonsai Photograph



The above 1890s carte de visite shows two Japanese girls posing with a bonsai, a convention in Meiji era photography. First of all, the long hanging sleeves indicate they are young and unmarried. Note the pot; this deep “bathtub” style of pot was the overwhelming favorite bonsai pot shape in Japan until the end of the Meiji era in the early 20th century. Note also the extremely shaped top of the conifer tree. One might also note the shoes, which were for keeping cute little feet up out of the mud.

REPOTTING THOUGHTS

Ivan Hanthorn

In February one must begin to think of the upcoming repotting season, which can begin as soon as late February for some materials. By March one should really be into repotting if you can protect the bonsai material from bad weather once repotting has occurred. So, with repotting in mind, we could not pass up passing along the following thoughts on the matter taken from another bonsai newsletter.

I Repotted My Bonsai, and It Died!

by Joe Day

If you are saying this, welcome to a huge band of brothers. Even very experienced bonsai artists have this happen. Death is a rude awakening to the fact that you probably did something wrong, and it had permanent results. What did you do wrong? Here is a list of common “wrongs”.

1. You cut too much rot off when you repotted.
2. You let the roots dry out while you were in the process of repotting.
3. You didn't settle the new soil into and around the roots, leaving air pockets that let roots dry out.
4. You didn't wire the root ball securely into the pot, allowing the roots to shift and shake in the soil mix.
5. You forgot to water the tree after repotting.
6. You put the newly repotted tree outside on the bench when the humidity was low and the wind was high.
7. The bonsai was potted in a much higher position this year, so those beautiful roots would show up better. The former underground roots, now exposed, sunburned, dried out and died.
8. Thinking the bonsai needs more fertilizer, because the soil is new, you give it an extra strong dose of fertilizer... a great way to burn up all those new roots.
9. **You allow your soil to freeze after the buds begin to open.** [Editor's emphasis.]
10. You didn't take time to sift out your soil, because it didn't look that bad, and someone said the small stuff helps the new roots get started.
10. You reused some soil from a bonsai that died for some reason, but the soil still looked good. Or you could have had some very bad luck with a nasty fungus or blight. That's possible, but you still will get the blame.

Iowa Bonsai – Soil Survey

John Denny

There are more soil mix recipes than bonsai enthusiasts it seems. With repotting season nearly upon us, I thought readers might find it interesting to see what others are using for soil. I asked a few questions of some Iowa bonsai people. About half responded (Ron Heinen, Helene Magruder, Ivan Hanthorn, John Denny) and here are their answers. Questions were focused around soil components, recipes, sifting/sizing, and alterations of basic mix for various species.

Q: What is the composition of your bonsai soil mixes? List components and approximate percentages. Do you sift or manage your soil in any special way?

RH: My basic mix is equal parts Akadama, Pumice, and volcanic rock.....Definitely screened and managed by size, small to medium for akadama and pumice.

HM: I usually use equal portions of lava, pumice and akadama, the Boon mix. I will sift for size and also to remove dust and tiny pieces that could clog drainage. I use larger particles for larger trees, mid size for mid size trees, and I do buy an excellent shohin mix for my wee trees.

IH: I began bonsai following the soil recipes of John Naka. Those soil mixes were good in Southern California decades ago but not really good for my bonsai in mid-continental Iowa. Once I found the Boon recipe my trees improved immensely. One third akadama (usually medium particle size), one third pumice (usually medium particle size), and one third crushed lava (1/4" particle size average). This is perfect for conifers. For tropicals and deciduous, I double the portion of akadama. Akadama and pumice are Japanese in origin; the lava is American. I usually sift each component before combining and mixing, but when in a hurry I have skipped sifting but watered heavily immediately after watering until red grit no longer washes out of the container.

JD: I basically use Boon mix which is 1/3 each akadama, pumice, lava rock. Per 5 gallon container of soil, I add 1/2 cup each of horticultural charcoal and decomposed granite. I also use a Japanese product that is similar and saves me the work of sifting for particle size. It does not have the charcoal and granite added. Before this I used the soil the EIBA club made which was 40% pine bark, 30% each of turkey grit and Turface. This mix did not have enough air space, so the club began adding lava and the 4 components are added now in equal parts. I sift my soils to remove dust from all soils and I remove fines from soils for conifers, but not for deciduous trees. I also have larger size pumice to use as a drainage layer in larger pots.

Q: Do you alter your soil mix for various species like Tropicals, Conifers, Deciduous, shohin, seedlings, pre bonsai?

RH: I do alter the basic mix for various species/and age or development/and size. The mix just changes slightly with ratio of akadama/pumice/lava.

HM: I may add a bit more lava for trees that don't like wet feet such as pines or a bit more akadama for trees that don't like to get too dry. I use straight Kanuma for azaleas with the size adjusted for the size of the tree.

IH: See above for changing the basic recipe for tropicals and deciduous trees. For pre-bonsai I often use two alternate recipes. The first uses used bonsai soil. When I repot, I keep the soil for other uses, primarily for

enriching my garden. For pre-bonsai, I sift the used bonsai soil to remove fine rotted material and mix the remaining soil with Turface in a 1:1 ratio. Alternatively, I sometimes use Turface and akadama in a 1:1 ratio. Note that these soils are for pre-bonsai, in which case any soil at all is probably better than what the newbies were in before coming to me. The akadama/turface recipe is from Matthew Ouwinga, who has used this soil recipe for raising thousands of seedlings before marketing them. For seedlings, I usually use 100% Turface with sifted fines of spagnum moss on top. For Shohin I use the Boon mix but smaller sizes of all particles in the formula.

JD: Yes, Conifers get Boon mix, Deciduous and Tropicals get Boon with an extra part Akadama, shohin are potted in the Japanese mix except in a smaller particle size. My seedlings are potted in a mix of club soil and used Boon mix that has been well sifted and cleaned. Azaleas are potted in straight kanuma.

Q: Since you began using your current soil, what improvements have you noticed in your trees vs the soil you used before?

RH: Since I began using this formula, the increase in health/vigor/and quantity of fine feeder system is obvious (anecdotal). I might add that with my soil mixture it is imperative to use primarily organic fertilizers.

HM: I use this mix because the roots of my trees thrive on it.

IH: They live a lot longer. In particular, I have fewer problems getting them through the winter. Root rot is no longer a common occurrence for me.

JD: While visiting Michael Hagedorn in Oregon and seeing how his soil mix of pumice and akadama grew amazing roots compared to what I was seeing in my own trees, I decided the extra expense of a better soil was worth it. This was especially true when I considered if I purchased a tree for, say, \$150, then the upcharge for repotting was maybe \$10 of soil divided by three years until I had to repot again. Three bucks a year for my \$150 tree to have much better roots, health, growth, beauty. A bargain.

After the change in soil mix, I saw far more overall root growth characterized by lots of fine roots. At repotting time, the soil would come out of the pot and root/soil mix would be so full of roots that it would hold the shape of the pot. Before the change, the root ball would crumble as it came out of the pot. And the roots were long stringy roots that grew on the bottom edge of the pot with very little fine roots. My trees have more growth, more buds, and more overall strength which allows me to work them harder and develop them faster.

(If you want to see photos of root growth in soil with Turface versus root growth in akadama and pumice, check out Michael Hagedorn's blog: <http://crataegus.com/tag/turface/>

Michael is not the kind of guy to rip anything or anyone, but he does not like Turface in bonsai soil and has good reasoning, photos, and experience.)