IBA News & Muse
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IBA MAY Activities

May 20, 7 PM, IBA MEETING
Des Moines Botanical Garden

Topic: Dave Lowman will lead a hands-on session of potting the Chinese elm trees we wired in a workshop meeting two months previous. If you did not attend then and have something to repot during the meeting or at home, please attend. There is no end to new secrets of potting that can actually keep the tree alive. Be sure to bring your own pot and bonsai soil or have placed an order with Dasu Bonsai (Dave Lowman) to bring for you to the meeting.)

RECORD KEEPING FOR BONSAI
Ivan Hanthorn

I would like a few more responses before a summary discussion of record keeping in the Iowa bonsai community. At present it looks like only three people keep any notes at all on their bonsai. If true, then expensive errors are being made.

EIBA MAY Activities

May 8, 6 pm. Board Mtg at Nothing But Noodles Restaurant on Collings Rd.

May 11, 9 am – 4 pm Mother's Day Flower Show at Noelridge Park.

Members please think about showing a tree or just come out to view the show!

May 15, 7 pm. Club Mtg at Bill Englert home in Swisher.

Topics include spring pruning and candling on club Foster trees, and Creating Deadwood – jin and shari.

Inside This Issue

This delightful little Japanese quince (Chaenomeles speciosa) looks old and yet is so small. (I can't imagine watering this tree properly day in day out, but that's just me. Jd) From Bonsai Bark.

Where the spirit does not work with the hand, there is no art.

Leonardo da Vinci

Timely Tips

It has been a cool, wet spring for sure, but finally some sun and warm temperatures have arrived. I hope your trees have come out of the long very cold winter and are showing good signs of growth.

Temperate trees should be outside by now enjoying sunshine. Wait until the nighttime temperatures are above 55 degrees to put tropical trees outdoors. Choose your siting carefully and watch as the sun changes its position to take advantage of its rays. Also be sure to turn your trees regularly so they get good sun from all directions and do not grow one sided.

Many trees like a bit of protection from the wind. Some trees wind burn easily. Others like to fly off benches, especially taller trees and fuller pines. Avoid broken trees and pots. Accidents make bonsai less fun!

Check your trees daily to see if they need water. Growing trees take up more water and wind can also dry them out. Most trees should be on a regular fertilizing schedule by now. I wait until the candles on white pines and other mountain pines have hardened off before I fertilize them to keep the needles short. Black pines should be kept well watered and fertilized as their candles develop. In a few weeks you can cut the candles on healthy black pines to encourage shorter needles and budding back on the branches.

Deciduous trees are growing rapidly now. Keep the new shoots pinched back to 2-4 leaves. This will encourage ramification and shorter internodes. If you want to develop a thicker branch let it grow wild and it will develop more rapidly. It may look a little unsightly but keep in mind the results you hope to achieve.

Azaleas and flowering trees like crab are quite showy right now. Enjoy them! Take photos, too!

Begin watching for pests like aphids, mites, neighbor kids and their dogs. You can spray the aphids and mites. You are on your own with the neighbor kids!

Watering and Rainfall

By John Denny

I watched a light rain fall this spring. “Ah, good for my trees.” I thought to myself. “And I can skip the watering can today.” The next day, a windy one, I went to water my trees and noticed all were fine, but two trees seemed to have browned overnight. What happened…?

The trees, one a very full small Hinoki cypress, the other a thick little mugho pine, had both been repotted this spring. So, not a lot of roots combined with a lot of green foliage. The trees had been six weeks since repotting and had been fine outside the prior couple of weeks.

However, I suspect what happened was the light rain was enough to only wet the top half inch of soil on my trees. And these two trees in question had such thick foliage that the rain water just ran off the tight foliage and none actually got to the soil.

So, when the winds came early the next morning, the soil in those small pots dried almost completely and the foliage dried and browned nearly overnight.

I have both trees in the garage by a window where they get light and are misted several times a day. Perhaps, they will be saved. Perhaps not. Even if successful those two nice trees will be set back a few years.

This problem was a combination of small pots, somewhat recent repotting, dense foliage that deflected rain, light rain followed by high winds.

Unless rainfall has been particularly heavy and you are convinced that the entire soil mass is fully saturated, bonsai should still be watered after rainfall.

Bonsai Smart: Watering Basics (from Bonsai4me)

This article is pertinent as we begin the growth season and watering becomes more important. Also, the quickest way for a new bonsai hobbyist to give up the hobby and quit the local club is to kill his or her first few trees. Watering is complicated. It has many variables to balance. The editors hope this beginning article covers the basics. Please keep in mind this article is targeted to the U.K. audience, hence, the unusual language and spellings e.g. “compost” equals “soil”. And not everything from their wetter environment applies to us in Iowa.

“Bonsai, as with nearly all other types of cultivated plant, require moisture at their roots to survive. Without a continual source of moisture, the tree is unable to continue its life process, initially losing leaves, then branches and finally the entire tree can die. Never doubt that the quickest way of killing a bonsai is to allow the compost to dry out completely.

However, though the effects of under-watering are immediate, over-watering a bonsai also causes ill-health in trees. The effects of continual over-watering takes much longer to become noticeable and can often be difficult to diagnose.
Established plants and trees growing in the ground have the ability to 'adjust' to their habitat and the quantity of water that is available to them. If there is not enough water available to the root system, the roots will spread out into the soil until enough moisture can be reliably acquired. Thus plants growing in relatively dry areas will have far-reaching root systems that will continue to spread out until a reliable source of moisture can be found.
On the other hand, trees growing in damp conditions where moisture is permanently available in the upper levels of the soil, will tend to have shallow root systems as they have easy access to moisture.

In the confines of a pot, a bonsai loses this ability to self-regulate its exposure to moisture. It is unable to govern how much or how little water it accesses. The compost in a bonsai pot is also far less stable than soil in the ground, its ability to dry out is greatly increased and it is greatly affected by the outside influences such as the weather and the surrounding ambient temperature.

Correctly watering your bonsai is a skill itself and is not as straightforward as one might expect when first starting out. It is often said in Japan that it takes 3 years to learn to water correctly. It can sometimes take three years of tree losses before a bonsai enthusiast realises that it is his/her watering regime that might be the cause!

THE EFFECTS OF UNDERWATERING AND OVERWATERING

Plants rely on a continual flow of water to stay alive and to grow. Water is absorbed from the compost into the roots by a process known as osmosis, the water is then pulled up the body of the plant and is released into the atmosphere through the foliage. This process allows the plant to distribute vital nutrients throughout its structure. However, without a source of moisture at its roots, this flow of water is interrupted and the plant structure quickly collapses and dries out. Leaves and branch tips are the first areas to be affected, followed by branches. Finally the trunk and roots themselves collapse and dry-out by which time it is unlikely that the tree will survive without damage. Application of water at this point is often too late; moisture can actually be absorbed out of the roots back into the wet compost in a process known as reverse osmosis.

(cont. p 6)

Peter Tea, Bonsai Artist

By Ivan Hanthorn

I attended a Peter Tea bonsai workshop at the Lauritzen Gardens in Omaha on Saturday, April 26. Peter is a charming, practical, focused, skilled bonsai master who is an outstanding teacher. Even if one does not have an opportunity to work with him, keeping up with his blog can be very informative. Check out peterteabonsai.wordpress.com. Having finished his internship under Junichiro Tanaka at Aichien Bonsai Garden in Japan in 2013, Peter returned to his business in San Jose, California, Peter Tea Bonsai.

One of the reasons that I attended the workshop was that the first part of the day was a session on bonsai pottery. Peter brought pots from his own collection for illustrative purposes, some of them very old. Participants were encouraged to bring pottery examples from their own collections to add to the discussion; they complied with enthusiasm. What ensued was one of the best group discussions of bonsai pots that I have ever experienced. Peter's presentation clearly showed that the Chinese pots of the last two centuries provided the models and the stimulus for pots produced later in Japan and then in America and Europe. The Chinese model is still the most valuable in the antique market and the most classical look for exhibition. Peter showed the group a few insider tricks for telling the difference between an original old pot and a reproduction. Regardless of age, one should feel the pot, all surfaces, inside and out. Let your fingers inform you about the surface characteristics of the pot. This does have importance, for visual effect and for plant health.

What became clear to me during lunch discussions and then commentary during the afternoon working session is that Peter has been encouraged to come back in the future to continue working with the bonsai club. While other big name bonsai artists are also probably going to appear in the Omaha area in future, Peter Tea is on the verge of becoming the bonsai sensi of Eastern Nebraska and Western Iowa. At lunch Peter talked in terms of the bonsai business going where there are bonsai, and guess what, there are bonsai in the Midwest. Peter Tea is a rising star worth attention.

Peter Tea working on a black pine in Japan.

Tree of the Month – English Oak (*Quercus rober)*

By Ivan Hanthorn

Quercus rober, commonly called English Oak in this country and Great Britain, has several other common names often affected by location: French Oak, German Oak, European Oak, as well as peduncular oak. It is native to most of Europe, and to Anatolia to the Caucasus, and also to parts of North Africa. It is a long-lived tree, with a large wide spreading crown of rugged branches. While it may naturally live to an age of a few centuries, many of the oldest trees are pollarded or coppiced, both pruning techniques that extend the tree's potential lifespan, if not its health. Two individuals of notable longevity are the Stelmužė Oak in Lithuania and the Granit oak in Bulgaria, which are believed to be more than 1,500 years old, possibly making them the oldest oaks in Europe. The symbolism of the oak as noble and strong is associated with folk tales, concepts of nation, and national emblems and coinage around Europe, particularly in Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark, Croatia, Slavonia, Bulgaria, and of course England, where the English Oak is symbolic of the world-wide naval power of England in the era of wooden (oak) ships.

Quercus robur is cultivated as an ornamental tree in the temperate regions of most continents. It now does quite well in the American Midwest. The typical development of the tree includes a period of quite rapid growth for around 80-120 years, followed by a gradual slowing down. It progresses from a young, smooth, silvery brown barked sapling to a huge, rugged, hollow hulk, with rough, hard, deeply fissured bark. After about 250-350 years, decline sets in. Branches die back, and the diameter growth slows right down. In England, a study of Wistman's Wood high on Dartmoor showed that the Oak trees measured in 1621, are the same height today.

Somewhat amazingly, this is one of the few oaks that can make a very beautiful bonsai. The notoriously large leaves of most oaks discourage use of the family for bonsai cultivation, but for the English Oak and Pin Oaks, Live Oaks and Chinquapin Oaks. Generally oaks are tolerant of a fairly wide range of soils and moisture, but care must be taken to avoid water logging the soil. Although some grow in poor or sandy soil, they all will benefit from adequate humus and the white oaks, including the English Oak, tolerate a bit more moisture.

Repot in the spring on a two to four year schedule. Younger trees more often. A tree ready for display might only need repotting every five years. The first two or three repottings will be the ones to cut back the main tap root. This will encourage development of the nebari and allow the tree to fit in a normal bonsai pot. The tap root is mainly an anchor and not a feeder, but it cannot be cut back to much at once. Prune a week or two later after the buds start to show activity again. Oaks do back bud. A well fed healthy tree will respond vigorously to this and throw out new shoots at every latent bud. Shoots can be pinched all growing season or they can be left alone to help thicken the tree. Deal with apical buds in a whorl before they all extend, unless you are planning it as a sacrifice branch. As a single bonsai tree, it presents well as an informal upright. It can also be planted in small groups.

English Oak rarely appears in the bonsai literature, so finding guidance can require a real search. Harry Tomlinson, a very talented English bonsaiist, discusses English Oak in his book Bonsai Inspirations 1, which recently came back into print. He also discusses the tree on his website www.bonsai4me.com. I read Tomlinson's advice frequently, and I have long lusted for an English Oak to work with. So this spring I am working with a three trunk planting of English Oak in the largest pot I ever purchased. It has been in my garage for years waiting for a big tree. I hope to be here when the oaks reach their maximum height.

English Oak bonsai, Walter Pall

Bonsai Smart: Watering Basics

(cont. from p 3)

As previously mentioned, the effects of over-watering are far more subtle and can take a relatively long period of time to detect. Over-watering creates an environment for the root system that is permanently wet. Roots need oxygen to 'breathe' and the presence of too much water reduces the ability of the compost to absorb air. This in turn causes the fine root hairs to suffocate and die. The immediate effect to the tree is a loss of vigour as parts of its root system are unable to grow and/or dieback.

More worryingly, the dead roots start to rot. Naturally occurring bacteria are able to colonize the dead tissue and in very wet composts are able to thrive. As the root system continues to die back from the effects of overwatering, the root-rotting bacteria are able to spread throughout the root system and slow (if not completely stop) the ability of the tree to seal the remaining live root-tips. Gradually the live portion of the root system becomes smaller and as it does it is able to support less of the visible top growth of the tree.

Foliage on the tree will start to yellow and drop; smaller branches will shrivel and die back. As the live portion of the root-ball becomes even smaller, it is eventually unable to support the primary branches and the trunk, causing the tree to die.
Root-rot is often only detected at repotting time in Spring. Rotted roots will be found to be black and will disintegrate when touched. The only reliable way of stopping root-rot is to cut away all dead areas of root.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I WATER?

As has already been discussed, it is important to avoid the effects of under-watering and overwatering. So how do you water a bonsai correctly?

Firstly, NEVER water to a routine. Simply watering on a daily basis without first observing the condition of the bonsai soil is often carried out by beginners following the advice of well-meaning bonsai retailers. Bonsai can indeed require water on a daily or even

twice daily basis, particularly in hot weather or early Spring. However, watering to a routine commonly leads to permanently wet compost at other times. If the compost does not lose some of its moisture content between each watering, it means it is permanently wet, leading to problems associated with overwatering.

Instead, trees should be checked routinely (*at least* on a daily basis), so their water requirements can be observed and they can then be watered when they actually require it. The surface of nearly all bonsai composts change colour and appearance when it starts to dry out. With careful observation, it is always possible to tell whether or not the compost surface is dry or not. This can take anything from 12 hours to a week or longer after watering, depending on a variety of factors such as the surrounding ambient temperature, plant vigour, pot size and whether it has rained or not. In the UK, trees tend to need watering daily during the Summer but with lower temperatures and increased rainfall during Autumn, Winter and early Spring, watering needs can change day by day. Never assume that because it has rained your tree has received enough water particularly during the Summer. Often, it only rains enough to wet the upper layers of the compost.
The correct time to water is when the top centimetre of the compost has started to dry out. With regular observation of your trees on a daily basis, you should be able to apply water when it is actually required. Allowing the compost to dry a little between each watering will ensure that they are not overwatered. Different trees have different water requirements, try to water individual trees in a collection as they require it, rather than en masse.

FITTING YOUR WATERING SCHEDULE AROUND WORK HOURS
In the real world, many of us are away from home during the day and are not able to check or water our trees. To allow the tree to go without water for any length of time is disastrous and should be avoided at all costs.Get to know your trees; know which ones are likely to dry out during the day while you are away. Know which trees will dry out if the weather is forecast to be hot or windy. If there is a risk that a tree may dry out during the course of the day; water in the morning before you leave home.(Despite what you may read) There is no reason to base watering your trees in the evening time; try making your main watering time in the morning so that your bonsai are well-watered before the heat of the day, and then only water those that require it, in the evening.

THE EFFECTS OF SOIL ON WATERING PRACTISES
The soil that your trees grow in has much influence on how frequently water is required and on how diligently you must water correctly.Organic soils containing peat or 'soil' are those that are most likely to cause problems associated with overwatering; the soil is likely to be retain too much water. Conversely it can be much more difficult to water thoroughly as water will tend to run off the dry surface leaving the interior of the rootball still dry after watering.Inorganic soils containing akadama, turface, seramis, grit etc are water retentive enough to keep the soil moist for the duration of a hot Summers day and also make the overwatering difficult. In other words, if an inorganic soil is used, the risk of overwatering is greatly reduced.

HOW SHOULD I WATER?
If you allow the compost to dry a little between watering you will avoid the effects of overwatering. When the tree does require water though, it needs a thorough soaking. Avoiding overwatering does not mean just 'moistening' the bonsai soil instead of watering it properly. Each time you water, it is important that the entire rootsystem and body of compost is properly wetted to avoid pockets of dry soil where roots could be left to dry out and die.

The Japanese have an adage for watering; 'For bonsai, it rains two times'. Water should be applied twice; the first watering wets the soil so that any dry soil particles will accept moisture better as they tend to shun water at first. Water should be applied all over the compost surface until it can be seen to run out of the drainage holes. The second watering should be left for 10-20 minutes by which time any previously dry areas of the compost will be ready to accept water. For a second time, water thoroughly all over the surface of the compost until water can be seen to run out of the drainage holes of the pot. The compost and root system should now be sufficiently wetted until the next watering is required."