

WINTER CARE

This document is written for the Johannesburg/Pretoria area. Bonsai Winter Care beyond these areas may differ. – Jonathan Cain

PLACEMENT

The exposed part of the bonsai above the ground can tolerate colder temperatures, than the part below the ground.

Not all plants are as frost hardy below ground as they are above. In some species the previous season's growth, once properly hardened off, can tolerate up to 10°C lower temperatures than the roots.

Try to elevate your bonsai above the ground. The overnight temperature on the ground is often colder than that at ground level. This happens because there is more humidity in the ground than in the air above the ground. The main damage occurs when the moisture in the roots expands as it freezes, and literally bursts the tissue.

If you are unable to use benches or elevate your bonsai, cover the less hardy trees with frost cloth. Ensure that there is an air gap between the frost cloth and the crown of the bonsai. Be aware that chill factor in cold winds will cause more damage than the surrounding ambient temperature. So use walls and material to deflect those cold winds from your bonsai.

When temperature gets really cold it is also a good practise to place the trees inside a house or greenhouse. A cost effective method to minimise the effects of frost, is using a fan to move the air around.

Be aware that trees placed in warm environments above 10 deg C may end dormancy and may start growing.

WINTER HYGIENE

Many fungal spores and small pests spend the winter in the debris that accumulates on the soil surface, between the Nebari, in forks in the branches and in fissures in the bark. Most will be present all year round, in one form or another, and are relatively harmless under normal circumstances. However, small bonsai in the cosy, predator-free environment of a poly tunnel are more vulnerable. So before you tuck your trees up for winter clear all leaves, remove weeds, defoliate all deciduous trees and clear other debris from the twigs and branches and remove all small cobwebs. Keep an eye out for scale insects. Tweezers, a soft wire brush and an old toothbrush will come in handy.

Some harmful pests over winter lay eggs in the fissures of the bark. Trees with flaky or cracked bark will benefit from an application of a proprietary winter wash.

The cosy spaces in and beneath the exposed roots are favourite hiding places for woodlice and other insects.

Pull yellow or dead needles off conifers and junipers. Take special care to clean the inner branches of dead needles as well, taking your time in order to be thorough. Many pests, especially spider mites, live in this debris where they reproduce and feed remarkably quickly under winter protection.

WATERING

Do not neglect watering when it is cold. The soil must remain moist, not too wet and not dry. The best time to water is early in the morning and no later than 3 pm in the afternoon. The reason for not watering late in the afternoon, is that water does not evaporate through the night and may freeze in the early morning. If it is windy, your trees will dry out faster.

The exception are Baobabs must not get watered until the new buds break and to a lesser extent, the Corel Tree. Once the leaves start dropping ALL water must be stopped. Baobabs must be protected below 5 deg C. There is no need to bare root the Baobab, as you will damage the root system. Simply place them inside you home on a display or coffee table.

WINTER JOBS

Now is a good time to give attention to your tools. Sharp tools are essential for efficient working and for the health of your trees, and nothing blunts tool quicker than pruning grit-covered roots. Take some time out now to sharpen all your tools carefully or get them done by someone professionally. Also remove dirt and grit from the blades, and give the working parts a bit of lubricant.

Inspect your staging, including cinder blocks and benches now, and replace any rotten or broken slats. We have had whole shelves collapse onto shelves below with bad consequences.

Have you noticed that you never seem to have the right pot for the tree when you need it? This is the time of year, when decisions like this can be made, so prepare for next planting season by deciding on what pots you really need and sourcing them now.

It is also a good time to look at your collection of used pots, clean them and get ready for the potting season.

PRUNING

The problem with pruning in late autumn is protecting the wound from damage and drying out before it begins to heal in spring. The dry winters will cause deep scarring and fast drying out of wounds. Cut paste or wood glue offers protection from drying out.

It is a good time to cut fine branches of deciduous species in autumn. As the leaves have fallen, the structure, secondary and tertiary branches can now be seen and attended to.

Should some deciduous trees have not lost their leaves, such as the Acacias, defoliate and force them into dormancy. They will come back stronger in Spring.

WIRING

Don't wire - unwire! Let your trees rest and stretch for a few months before re-wiring. The branching is usually more brittle and bending a branch may result in a snapped branch. Wire may also stop the little sap flow that is available. Wired branches often die during winter, as wiring does cause stress to the tree, and it won't begin to recover until spring - so if you need to wire, concentrate on adjustments rather than drastic shaping. Guy wiring is a suitable alternative.

Deciduous trees are best wired just before their growing spurt. Begin in late July, just before the buds begin to swell.

If you must try to uncoil the wire, start with the thinner sizes first. From the tip of the branch towards the base, and hold each turn firmly as you work along the branch.

Jins and Sharis

Autumn and winter are not the best times of year to make new jins and sharis because the bark is very difficult to remove when the sap is not flowing, But it is a good time to treat existing deadwood areas with a wood protection. Some durable woods may not need wood protection.

ARRANGING YOUR BONSAI-EN

Plan for all similar species to be placed together so that their watering and feeding programs are done on a controlled basis.

You can start moving your trees out around during September. But be careful with figs and only move when there is a possibility of no more frost and cold fronts.

FEEDING

Evergreen trees are still growing and active. Do not neglect feeding. Deciduous trees should get fertilisers with little or no Nitrogen.