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Moss – The Myth and the Misses

Greetings once more. Moss is one of the most misunderstood aspects of bonsai. I have written about moss in the past but have been receiving quite a few emails about the subject, so I thought it could do with a revisit.

The wonderful photos of price-winning bonsai that one sees in books and magazines fool us into thinking that these beautiful specimens are kept constantly in the state of perfect shape, weed free soil, and with a lovely carpet of moss surrounding the base of the tree and the roots like miniature grass. This is not true, particularly the moss bit. The moss is placed there simply for the photograph! Immediately afterward the moss is removed. Likewise, for trees displayed at shows. Once the tree has been removed from the display the moss will be removed, or, if it is left there the bonsai grower will know that it will die off in the space of a few days.

There is a simple logic attached to this. Moss needs to be kept constantly moist and cool, and needs to be cultivated in shade. Bonsai trees, although needing a regular watering, need their soil to *almost* dry out from time to time to enable new air to reach the roots, and they also need as much sun as possible. The two items need entirely different growing conditions, and to attempt to grow them together is simply courting disaster. Enough sun for the bonsai and the moss dies, enough shade for the moss and the tree will grow large leaves and the branches will be long and thin (called leggy).

Another reason to stay away from moss, is that a thick matt of moss prevents water from penetrating through to the soil below, and even though one may think one is watering enough, underneath the green carpet the roots of the bonsai are being starved of water. Moss and fungi that grow on the bark of trees may look really nice, and if kept to a minimum do not do too much harm to the tree, however trees do absorb oxygen through the bark, and moss retards this, so do not let it spread out of control. I have some problems with moss on the trunks of my acacia Burkei and Knob Thorn acacia. Both species have soft corky bark and the moss makes the bark rot a little. I brush the moss off with a medium hardness wire brush which also stimulates the bark to thicken.

About the only time moss is encouraged is on the soil of a forest or landscape planting that is planted on a fairly flat surface like slate. In this case the moss works very much like grass and binds the soil, preventing it from being washed away during watering.

Ok, so, even after all the warnings about moss, you still want to grow some moss for your bonsai. Well, it is not too difficult. Find some moss, probably in a dark damp corner of a drain or similar unsavory location. Scrape the moss off with a paint scraper or butter knife. Place the scrapings in the sun to dry out. The resulting powder are moss spores, and are the "seeds" for your moss crop.

The next step is to soak a brick in water and then rub the moss spores on the surface of the brick. Place the brick in a shallow basin of water and leave it in a dark shady place. You may find the place where you took your scrapings from has the correct conditions so begin there. Keep the brick moist. It should absorb a bit of the water it is standing in, but you may also need to spray the brick with a mister quite frequently at the start. After a few days moss should begin to form on the brick surface. When you want to use a bit of the moss, just scrape a section off the brick like miniature instant grass.

Another handy trick to get moss to grow on pots to make them look older is to paint the surface of the pot with yoghurt. I expect the natural unsweetened variety would work the