

It is that time of year that we see not only changes to the weather and the levels in Len's bottles of wine, but changes in the OBK Committee. I will not go into the detail here, suffice to say that I have been asked to take over from Hennie in the Communications Portfolio. Hennie is not a particularly big chap, but if you look closely, he does have remarkably large feet, and as a result, there is a large pair of shoes for me to endeavour to fill. I hope to do so to his high standards, and look forward to a year ahead of amongst other things, reformatting Len's What to Do, and correcting Geoff's spelling mistakes! ☺

Embrace this wonderful hobby, and try to do something different this year. Try some new tree types, a new style or two, what about sprucing up your En, doing that root graft or trying that air layering that you have always read about. What about that forest or how about collecting your snails, painting their shells and racing them at a club meeting rather than sending them to a salty demise! Whatever you choose to do, don't let this special hobby become mundane and repetitive. Grab it by the thorns and give it a good ol' shake up!

So, as the red wine dwindles, another ring is added to your trunks, the days get longer and the sap and temperatures slowly start to rise, may I wish you all well for an exciting fulfilling and happy year of bonsai ahead.

What to Do in July

July 10

I must say that I am excited and looking forward to Cape Bonsai Kai's 40th Anniversary which will be held in September, the Kai are bringing out Budi Sulistyono who is from Indonesia and it should be a memorable event, not to be missed by serious Bonsai growers. Just the social contact with other Bonsai growers gives you a huge learning experience not to mention different techniques and contrasting ways to do what we do every day. Start saving don't miss it!

It really is a pity that CRAB doesn't get its act together so we can have this experience every year.

Someone recently commented that it was peculiar that I nearly always start my column with a comment on the weather. For one thing the weather does have a big influence on our trees and I make it a point to watch the weather as often as possible and I guess that is inbred in me as the English in England have little else to talk about. This month the weather has an influence on our trees in different parts of the Peninsula as growers are reporting to me that they are experiencing early spring growth. I have had this happen to me in years past and I put it down to mild winter weather and my trees being placed in semi-shade conditions so that my trees did not experience much change in light conditions. The rains have been good this year, and may they continue so we do not have rationing this summer.

Please be aware though that because we do not have rationing we can waste water. Make sure your hose sprinkler is only emitting enough water. This can be achieved by blocking the holes around the edges of your sprinkler and not turning the tap on full strength.

(I know this piece about blocked drainage holes is becoming boring but we have new growers coming into the club every month and especially around now just after our beginner's course and they find the information helpful) The rains mean keeping a watch out for blocked drainage holes. Blocked holes can be caused by a variety of things such as slugs or snails curled up in the drainage hole. Obviously these need to be removed and eliminated. Snails and Bonsai growers just don't get along and I find the best time to catch these pests (on the job so to speak) is when it's raining, so get out the umbrella and Wellies and have a walk around next time it rains, especially at night, you will be amazed at the number of snails and slugs you catch. I just drop them in a bucket of salt water and dispose of them. Snails are particular to figs, especially fig seedlings and I have seen snails slither over lush lettuce leaves to graze on figs seedlings. Don't forget that your trees need watering sometimes in winter. It's very important that we do not become complacent about watering because lots of damage can be done during dry spells and even when it rains lightly and the rain does not penetrate lush foliage. Growing medium should not be kept soggy as this will lead to root rot and a weakening of the tree in Spring or worse still the tree could die. All mosses should have been removed as they keep the growing medium excessively wet. Do not throw the moss away but put into flat trays and keep under the bench for Spring. Evergreen trees will benefit from being placed in full sun as this will dry out the growing medium reducing the chance of soggy soil. If you do check your trees when it's raining check for water logging and if you notice pots with standing water and the drainage hole is clear you need to tilt your pot to allow the excess to drain off. Place a stone under one end of the pot to keep it in that position.

Watch out for worms as they mulch up your coarse mix and the fines that are produced block the drainage hole. You will probably notice at this time of year that your growing medium (soil mix) has been compacted over the previous season, it is advantageous to just loosen the top layer of your growing medium to aerate the mix, similar to a gardener when he forks over the soil. The other thing I have noticed in the past is that my growing medium was very often being disturbed. Holes were dug and the GM left in a pile. I noticed two Cape Robins hard at work digging in my mix and on investigation found some white grubs. Now I have only found the grubs

in pots where I have deposited thick piles of Bounce back and am presuming that they have originated from this. So if I use Bounce Back this year I will spread thinner as it has not happened on those pots.

You should be seriously thinking about getting into your Winter pruning and I started yesterday and had huge fun as I had not touched my trees for quite a while. I pruned my Elms and one of them is looking quite good I will put it into a pot this year.

First thing we repot is Swamp Cypress. Swamps need a heavier mix so make sure you have all the gravel and potting soil you need as well as pots for the coming season. If you missed the Lime Sulphur Spraying you can still spray with Oleum and give some protection for the coming year from pests and diseases. If you have forgotten to spray lime sulphur for the pests remember that Lime sulphur still needs to be painted on your deadwood, so wait for a dry spell when the wood dries out and paint the deadwood with the Lime Sulphur, It really should have been done earlier but better late than never.

Shortly maybe before the next What To Do we could be seeing the fresh new growth especially of Celtis, and So towards the middle of the month, start watching your Celtis and Elms for signs of growth. Look very closely at your trees and don't wait for the buds to actually open but inspect the buds and as soon as you see a swelling jump in and pot. Elms are quite interesting at this time as the actual twigs start to look healthier and possibly changes to a sort of red colour. The buds then swell, and burst open to a beautiful light green.

This is the time we can put into action those plans we have devised in the winter season. We can also get our hands into the soil and repot which I always enjoy. Just be aware that repotting should not be a mechanical operation:- lift tree out prune roots put back into pot, there are all sorts of things to check.

Soil mix that we mixed last year, did it give you good results (do you know what the mix was, keep records) were there plenty of roots, does the soil mix still smell healthy, this year and not give off an unpleasant smell. Does the amount of roots grown tell you to prune the roots heavily or just a light trim. Is the pot correct for the tree, not only shape and colour but depth and length. Remember that bigger pots keep the growing medium wet longer. Is the planting angle correct not only sideways but forwards and backwards? The visual weight of the foliage and trunk lines can determine the planting position which is most important. Lastly do you raise the tree higher out of the pot or plant the tree level. So you see you have to be wide awake when repotting.

As we know Metasystox is no longer available as a systemic insecticide for the control of sucking insects and that the new replacement chemicals are Confidor supplied in a soluble or powder form or Merit a soluble chemical.

Evergreen trees need to be placed in as much sunlight as possible and I generally feed monthly with a half strength mixture of the lowest nitrogen based fertilizer I can find.

It's still a good time to clear the benches of all pots and then clean the benches of leaves and weed that are lying on or in the gravel on your benches. Then I spray with Jeyes fluid, strong mix.

If you do some wiring at this time take extreme care as branches are VERY brittle and snap for no reason at all. We all advocate watching your wiring to prevent wire bite but I was reading recently in a magazine where Francois Jeker (Bonsai Europe issue 2/2006) actually allows the wire to bite into pines so it swells in a grotesque manner, he then removes the wire and re-wires in the opposite direction allowing it to swell again with the result that the tree looks more gnarled as it ages. I know this works well on Acacias as I have seen the results from this. It could also look okay on cork barked elms and other rough barked trees but not on Celtis or smooth barked trees.

Part of the enjoyment I find in growing Bonsai is just to be able to sit back with a glass of red wine and a Bonsai magazine from our library and just enjoy the season.

Just to make this column more interesting and knowledgeable I invite growers to mail me with useful information that we can spread through this column. I will acknowledge the contributor in the article.

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Wise Japanese sage say's;

"It's what you learn after you think you know it all that counts."