

FOUR SEASONS

Bonsai Club of Michigan

APRIL, 1998

ISSUE NO. 04

The Four Season's Bonsai Circus!

The "Bonsai Circus" is an annual event featuring simultaneous demos and discussions on a variety of subjects. Several individuals will be giving expert advice on specific concerns such as soil, design, tools, etc. Members and guests can listen, ask questions, or move on to another discussion; all at their own pace. "Ringmaster" **Dee Risch** has been volunteered to be our host for one more year.

MEETING DATE: April 26, 1998
MEETING TIME: 2:00 pm

Bonsai Circus

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
814 N. Campbell, Royal Oak

This year's presenters should include: **Peter Evanoff, Dean Atkinson, Dale Ducklow, Vance Hanna, George Randall, Al Speier, Chris Wasiak, and Vance Wood.**

Feel free to bring in your trees for advice on specific problems.

Ringmaster Dee Risch needs volunteers to help set up for the circus; (about 6 people). If you would like to help out, all you need to do is show up an hour early for the next meeting (1:00 instead of 2:00).

Making Your Own Bonsai Soil

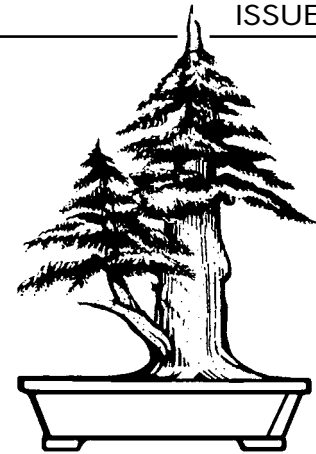
Article By Todd

Spring repotting has never been a problem for me. I've always been able to repot all my bonsai and pre-bonsai stock every year, on time...(right, if you believe this, I have some swamp land in Florida that I'd like to sell you.)

We all know how much work the spring season can be. Why add to the hassle by making your own soil? If you believe the articles published in magazines like *Bonsai Today*, you may feel that making the soil is an integral part of the art of bonsai, but I've tried the premixed bonsai soil, and it's not bad. In fact, just like much of the "expert" advice about bonsai, it's hard to tell if a certain technique has much effect at all. Making soil is much the same, how will you know if it's any better than the results you would get from the premixed stuff. If you need a lot of it, making your own soil can be a pain in the ass!

Now that I've convinced you of the fact that making your own soil is too hard, let me try to explain why it's worth doing...CONTROL! By making your own soil,

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ミシガン州の
四季盆栽クラブ

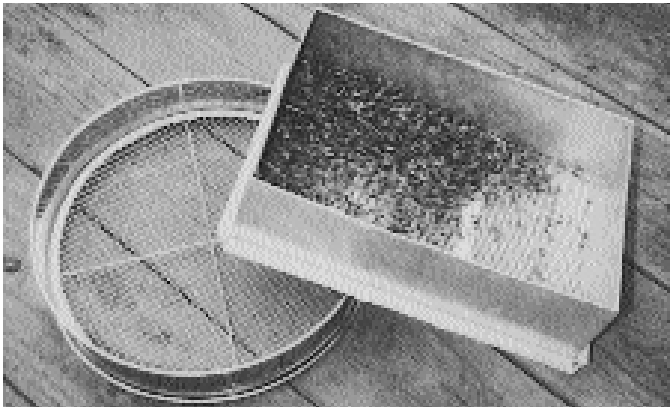
Editor's Corner

The organizers of MABA '98 St. Louis have sent me a flyer with the latest info on the convention in July. The big news is that if you register in the month of April, you will be eligible to win a free workshop. Call (314) 727-9191 before the end of the month, or ask me for a copy of the registration form.

Our own Vance Hanna is now an international bonsai celebrity. Vance was invited to give a lecture and show some of his trees at a well-known nursery and to be interviewed live on a local radio program.

The club would like to thank Dean Atkinson, Gordon Hoialmen, George Randall, and Vance Wood for filling-in at last month's meeting. The word from the attending members was that the discussion was very good.

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Essential Tools for Screening Your Own Bonsai Soil. On the Left is an Imported Japanese Product That Includes Three Interchangeable Screen Sizes. I Found That I Needed a Finer Mesh and Made the Screen Shown on the Right From a Section of Tin Furnace Duct and a Craft Screen.



Save the Pieces of Pine Bark That Are Too Large for Drainage Layers or for Potting Up Stock Like This Maple.

Continued from Making Your Own Soil

you can better control how your trees grow, adapt your soil to *your* watering habits, and best of all, you will learn more about the **process** of bonsai (which includes much more than the tree and the shape of the tree).

For the first few years that I dabbled with bonsai, I used the premixed soil. It worked pretty well, but curiosity got the best of me and I had to find out if homemade soil would be better.

My ingredients were pine bark (screened from Pine Bark Mulch), Turface (a baked clay product used mostly for the turf on sports fields), and Chicken Grit (crushed granite used by chicken farmers). I used a 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 mixture for just about everything that first year. The problem with the Chicken Grit is that it doesn't screen very easily, it's really heavy, and I'm beginning to suspect that it's too constricting on roots (except for perhaps pines with thick, tough roots).

I soon learned to put only a small amount of grit into the mix. (I have no exact formula – a hand fulla this, a hand fulla that...)

Now I use a mix that is equal parts pine bark and a Turface-like product that Gordon Hoialmen found last year. (Although I vary the mixture depending on the species of tree.) This new "Turface" has a larger particle size than I had used in the past, but I doubt that it makes much difference in the long run. For Pines, I still use Chicken Grit. I've heard Vance Wood

recommend Amber Swimming Pool Sand instead of Chicken Grit, but I've never been able to find any at the Pool Supply Stores near me.

And now for a few "secrets" about screening your soil. I prefer a coarse soil with no particles smaller than about 2 mm. I use a contraption made from a tin furnace duct adapter and a piece of plastic craft mesh. (I know there's a name for that needlepoint-hook-&-rug-backing-stuff, but I can't think of it!) I use it to sift out the dust. For pine bark, I use Pine Bark Mulch and an imported screening tray with the largest mesh (openings of about 5 mm) to sift out the "too large" particles. Turface-like products, Chicken Grit, and sand don't usually need anything but the dust sifted out. Throw the dust into your garden; it's not good for much else. The pieces that are too large for the big screen can be saved for drainage layers or used in the mix when you repot your bigger stock. Use the mid-sized particles you have left as ingredients for your bonsai.

Sift the ingredients separately before you mix them together. And for your own sanity, don't bother sifting into three different particle sizes like the magazines recommend. I've never been able to get ingredients with enough variety of particle size to be able to pull it off. Sift only a few handfuls of material at a time, and if you build yourself a box for screening like I did, don't use wood – it's too heavy. In any case, be prepared to get a sore back and aching thumbs. If possible, find someone who's dumb enough to

do it for you. Most people will think it looks fun. (Unfortunately, they usually catch-on after about 2 minutes.)

Use some hand lotion when you're done; dry soil tends to suck the life out of your hands. And if you have to leave the house for any reason, do yourself a favor and wash the dust off your face and out of your hair.

Not a pretty picture, is it? So, is premixed soil good enough? Is making your own soil really worth the hassle. I can't prove one is better than the other because it all depends on the individual. I do believe, however, that everyone should give it a try on at least a few trees. (And stick with it for a couple of years as a fair trial.)

Despite it all, I like to make my own soil because I get a complete picture of the cause and effect relationship between the soil mix and the growth of the tree. Whether you know it or not, your soil mix and your watering technique are more than casually related. You can't vary one without altering the other. When I have trouble with a new tree, it's usually because it's not in "my" soil and I've been over or under watering. Once a tree has been repotted, watering becomes much simpler.

Treat soil mix formulas with extreme suspicion; especially from persons in other countries and climates. I like a coarse soil without any fine particles, but what works for me and my lifestyle might not be best for you. Start with a basic formula and alter it to what you think best. Ingredients used in magazines are often unavailable locally, so find out what the people in your area use.

Finally, I like being able to alter my mixtures and ingredients each year. Every spring I re-evaluate the past year and refine how I do bonsai. (Not always without some mistakes.) This year's soil mixtures are a little different from last year's; and next year's will probably be different again.

So, I keep making my own soil even though it's a pain. I must be a masochist...which reminds me of a joke (totally unrelated to bonsai) about a masochist and a sadist:

The masochist says to the sadist, "hurt me!" And the sadist says, "no."