

Autumn Activities

By: Les Lonsdale

Although the Fall is not as busy for us as is Spring, still there are activities that can keep us busy in our bonsai gardens in preparation for Winter:

1. **Check wiring** – Trees can have a second ‘spurt’ of growth in early Autumn, second only to the growth the experience in Spring. Therefore, it is important to keep a watchful eye on any wire that is on your trees. Remove any wires that have become too tight, before they bite into the bark. If the limb is not ready to have the wire removed, then reposition new wire on the same limb. (*exception: pines and junipers aged appearance can be enhanced by allowing some wire-bite.*)
2. **Reduce watering** – As the days become shorter and the temperatures cool, transpiration slows in the trees, and they do not need as much water. Therefore, it is best to monitor your watering schedule and reduce the amount that they get. The trees should not, however, be allowed to dry out completely.
3. **Spray for pests/fungus** – Though the days are getting cooler, bugs still need to eat. They are also looking for places to lay their eggs for Winter. So, continue to monitor and spray for pests as well as fungus. Apply the proper treatment according to manufacturer’s instructions. (One source suggested to not use Malathion on maples – instead try permethrin-based sprays or insecticidal soaps.
4. **Continue fertilizing** –Fall fertilizing is important, so that trees can go into winter in good health and have an active bud break in Spring. Continue using a well-balanced chemical fertilizer on deciduous trees until soil temperatures drop consistently below 45 degrees, even if leaves have dropped. Roots are still active until temperatures drop below mid-40’s. Conifers and broad-leaf evergreens continue to process carbs. in winter, so continue to fertilize lightly with a chemical fertilizer. (Organic fertilizer is not effective if temps drop below 55F.)
5. **No heavy pruning** – After September (for Zone 8-9). Heavy pruning might encourage new growth, which is not desired this late in the season, as frost can cause die-back to un-hardened growth. Also, the more leaves that remain on the tree, the more sugars/carbs are produced which act as an 'anti-freeze' in the branches during the winter, which reduces frost/freeze damage. (Best 2 times to hard-prune deciduous trees is May and Jan. {*except for ‘bleeders’ – maple, birch, elm, grape - which are best hard-pruned in May and Nov. – Dec.*})
6. **Reduce Pine candles/buds** – Elongated candles should have been cut back now. Leave only the smallest 2 candles/branch tip. If there are bud clusters, remove all but 2 opposing buds. Keep the smallest ones on the top part of the tree and keep the largest ones on the lower part of the tree. Pluck out old needles on healthy branches to permit air and light into the branches. This balances energy and may encourage new interior buds to activate next Spring. Get details from pine instruction articles.
7. **Keep trees in light** – As the seasons change, so does the position of the Sun in relation to your trees. You may have to shift trees around so that they get the best amount of Sun. This will help them store energy and food for the Winter. After leaf drop, sun is no longer that important for deciduous trees.
8. **Move Tropicals indoors** – When the night temperatures drop below 50F, it’s time to begin acclimating your tropical trees to the indoors. However, it is best if you can acclimate them slowly to the drier indoor environment. So, when the days are warm, put them back outside. Take them indoors

for increasingly longer segments of time, until it is time to leave them in for the Winter. Spray them with water daily while they are inside and keep them away from drafty places. Reduce water, but do not let them dry out. Air circulation is recommended to reduce chance of fungal infections.

9. **Clean up** – Clean up fallen leaves, weeds, and other debris on benches which make good places for bugs and bug eggs to hide. This is a good time to clean juniper trunks/branches. Use a wire (brass) brush to remove loose bark and expose live veins. Insects/borers like to live in loose bark. Also, jin/shari can be created at this time. Bark on newly jinned branches is easy to remove now while sap is still up. Later, after it has dried, the branch can be carved.
10. **Gather seeds** – Now is also a good time to gather mature seeds from surrounding trees and stratify them over the Winter in the refrigerator for planting next Spring. This is also a good time to collect hard-wood cuttings for planting next Spring. Keep them in a bag of damp sand in the fridge until next April.
11. **Prepare Winter shelter** – It's not too early to prepare a place to over-Winter your trees, a place out of the wind, but where you can still water them when needed. If you over-Winter in the ground, after leaf-drop is a good time to begin putting them in their Winter beds. One idea is to place trees under the benches and mulch with pine shavings. Roots of all temperate trees can withstand temps down to at least 25F (*according to a horticultural root-kill chart from the University of Oregon - pg. 87 in 'Bonsai Heresy' book by Michael Hagedorn*). However, strong winter winds can cause dieback on thin branch tips.
12. **Kodak moments** – If you have any deciduous trees that are 'showing off'*, don't miss your opportunity to take it's picture for posterity's sake. One day (heaven forbid), the tree may go on to 'meet its maker'. But at least you'll have happy memories, if you get that snap shot.

*Senescence is the process that deciduous trees go through in Autumn that makes their leaves turn different colors and eventually fall off the tree. It has been found that the Fall colors will usually be better if Autumn nights have been cold earlier in the season, because that will begin the process of senescence sooner. Also, trees that have been defoliated in the Summer, as well as trees that have received lower levels of nitrogen throughout the Summer seem to show off their lovely Fall colors better.