

Sphagnum Moss Potting Technique by Roger Snipes

Brian Batchelder developed the technique of potting bonsai in pure sphagnum moss sometime in the 1980's. With this method, all the normal potting soil is replaced with pure sphagnum moss. While this technique can be used on virtually all trees, I have found that it is especially suitable for potting tropical and semi-tropical trees that must spend part of their time indoors. I find that it is easier to control watering when these trees are potted in sphagnum, and it is possible to keep moss growing on the surface of the sphagnum while the trees are indoors; something that is difficult to do when trees are potted in normal bonsai soil.

The sphagnum method is also valuable when using small pots, such as with *mame* and small accent plants. The small soil volume of these plantings normally means that they dry out very quickly between waterings; however, when they are potted in sphagnum, I find that they can go longer between waterings without drying out. (However, they can still need more frequent watering than plantings with a larger soil volume.) The method is not as suitable for very large trees since one must be able to pick up the bonsai and submerge the rootball during watering.

Instructions for Potting with Sphagnum Moss

Select an appropriate quantity of long fiber sphagnum moss and remove any grass, weeds, or other extraneous material. Soak the sphagnum in a bucket of water while the tree is being prepared. Select an appropriate bonsai pot for the tree. If you are doing any major pruning and wiring on the tree, this should be done before potting.

Remove the tree from its container and clean all the soil from the rootball. This is best done using a combination of teasing the roots out with a chopstick or root hook, and washing the remaining soil off with a stream of water. All of the soil must be removed from the roots.

Trim the roots as necessary to allow the tree to fit properly into the bonsai pot.

Once the roots are cleaned of soil and trimmed, place a layer of wet sphagnum in the bottom of the bonsai pot. Work wet sphagnum into and around the roots of the tree and position the tree in the pot. With the tree positioned in the pot, continue to pack wet sphagnum around the roots, working it in with your fingers. The sphagnum should be tightly packed in and around the roots. If the sphagnum has been properly packed around the roots you will be able to pop the tree out of the pot and the roots and sphagnum will hold the shape of the pot.

To give the composition a more finished look you can press collected moss (with all soil removed) onto the surface of the sphagnum, or you may leave it as is and wait for moss to start growing naturally on the surface.

Watering

As the bonsai dries you will notice that the sphagnum in the pot begins to feel firmer and dryer and if you lift the pot and tree you will notice that it is lighter than when freshly watered. The bonsai should be watered when the sphagnum is still somewhat moist and before it becomes totally dry and hard (the proper time to water will vary depending on the individual tree). When the bonsai is ready to be watered simply submerge the rootball, pot and all, in a container of water. Air bubbles will rise out of the sphagnum as it absorbs the water. When the bubbling stops it is saturated; remove the bonsai from the water and tilt the pot to one side and allow the excess water to drain off.

Fertilizing

The bonsai should be fertilized on a regular basis with a good water-soluble chemical fertilizer, such as Miracle Grow or Peters. Fertilize at the recommended intervals by submerging the rootball in a full strength solution of fertilizer and water, just as you would during normal watering. An alternate method of fertilizing is to use a weak solution of fertilizer (mixed at 10% of the recommended rate) every time you water.

Re-potting and Root Pruning

Just as with bonsai that are potted in a normal soil mixture, those that are potted in sphagnum will need regular re-potting and root pruning. When the roots fill the pot to the extent that it will not retain much water, it is time to re-pot. When the bonsai is at this stage you may also notice that the rootball actually shrinks to a certain extent, making the tree a bit loose in its pot.

When ready to re-pot, soak a suitable quantity of sphagnum in water. Prepare the bonsai by removing any decorative moss growing on the surface of the sphagnum that you would like to save and re-use. Remove the bonsai from its pot and cut about a third to a half of the rootball off (depending on the tree, state of training, etc.) using a sharp serrated knife. Be sure to cut some off the bottom as well as the sides. Place a fresh layer of sphagnum in the bottom of the pot and position the tree in the pot. Pack fresh sphagnum around the rootball, filling the empty space and packing the sphagnum in firmly. Press the saved decorative moss back on the surface of the sphagnum and you are done.