

Winter Protection for Your Hardy and Semi-Hardy Bonsai

By Barbara

Hardy bonsai are outdoor trees that are hardy in your particular zone (6 to 6.5 in the Etobicoke – Mississauga area). Collected trees and those found in nurseries (to be grown outside) are generally hardy. Examples are apple, birch, beech, boxwood, white cedar, hawthorn, hemlock, American hornbeam, juniper, larch, mugo and Scots pine, Japanese quince. These bonsai survive our winters well and actually require a period of dormancy.

Hardy Bonsai: Members of our club use variations of four different methods to shelter their hardy bonsai: place in a sheltered spot, garden method, build a shelter, and dig a pit.

1. Place in a Sheltered Spot:

Some members simply place their bonsai in a sheltered spot in the garden, perhaps covering with leaves or surrounding with bags of leaves for protection. Others place their trees in window wells on the sheltered sides of the house. This provides the least protection of the four methods and may be the most reliable for members living closer to the lake.

2. Garden Method:

Choose a free space in your garden that is somewhat protected from the wind. The idea here is to bury the tree up to the trunk so that the roots tend to stay frozen over the cold winter months and don't freeze and thaw as they would do if the small pot was exposed to the elements. It's a good idea to cover the pot and the bonsai soil with breathable fabric such as nylon stockings. This keeps the pot and soil clean. Level the soil around the pot to make sure that the ice doesn't build up around the trunk. If the pot will not withstand the freezing temperatures, the bonsai can be



removed from the bonsai pot and placed in the ground or in a temporary plastic pot. Trees should be dug into the soil before the ground freezes and the trees left there until the weather warms up in the spring. Make sure to water the trees in the fall or spring if there is a prolonged dry period. It's a good idea to shovel fluffy snow over the trees as well when available.

3. **Build a Shelter:**

Last year Bob demonstrated how to build a plastic shelter for outdoor bonsai. He built wooden frames for the sides and top of the shelter and wrapped double layers of heavy gauge plastic over the frames leaving an air space between the 2 sheets of plastic. The plastic was stapled to the frames which were then attached to each other to form a little greenhouse. A hinged roof was placed on top or a hinged door at the end. The greenhouse can be placed in a sheltered spot. Bonsai are then placed in the shelter once the deciduous



trees have dropped their leaves and a hard frost has occurred. It's a good idea to scatter a few moth balls around to discourage rodents from eating your trees. On days when there is a nice fluffy snowfall, the shelter can be opened to shovel snow over the bonsai to keep them moist and cold. In the spring when the weather starts to warm, it's important to open up the greenhouse during the day so that the trees don't break dormancy too soon.

4. **Dig a Pit:**

Those of you have attended summer workshops at Penny's may have seen her pit. She has a pit in the shelter of her back porch which she opens up in the fall. She places all of her trees in the pit sometime in November and leaves them there until spring. She throws in leaves as an extra protection and shovels in fluffy snow when it is available. The boards on the sides cover the pit when not in use and provide extra shelter in the winter.



Semi-Hardy Bonsai: Semi-hardy bonsai are trees that require a dormancy period but cannot withstand the cold winter temperatures in our location. Examples are azalea, Kingsville boxwood, cedars, cryptomeria, crape myrtle, Korean and Japanese hornbeam, Japanese maples, Trident maples, Japanese black and white pines, San Jose juniper, Chinese quince, zelkova.

These trees require some additional protection so that they are kept cold (with temperatures remaining around 0°C). A popular method is to place these bonsai on a shelf in an unheated garage or a cold room. In the garage, they should be placed along an inside wall and away from open doors but they do not require light. They should be placed in the cold room once the deciduous trees have lost their leaves and hard frosts have started. Remove debris from the pots and water the trees as necessary (usually every two weeks or month). Fluffy snow can be used to provide moisture when available. In the spring, the trees should be moved outside on warm days, particularly if their buds break and they are starting to form leaves, but they must be moved inside at night until the threat of frost is over. Watch for rodents such as mice which may nibble at the fine branches.