



Tropical Bonsai Tasks in February:

It seems that this month is when your tropicals begin to look a little worse for wear as our winter heating season drags on. Unless you have provided appropriate lighting and humidity, they look like they need a trip to Florida to bask in that tropical climate. I know the feeling.

One of the more popular tropical bonsai is Fukien Tea. A very small genus of tropical tree which was once referred to (and still often is) as *Carmona microphylla*, now reclassified as *Ehretia* sp. Fukien Tea is a tropical shrub originating in southern China and other parts of Southeast Asia. It is very popular for bonsai in China but is not a traditional favorite in Japan. It can be grown outdoors in warm climates, but is quite popular as an indoor bonsai.

Fukien Tea likes a bright location but should receive some protection from the direct, hot afternoon sun. Indoors, it does quite well under artificial lights. *Ehretia* prefers temperatures between 60° – 72° F, although occasional dips into the high forties produce no ill effects. It does not like drafts.

Keep well watered, reducing only slightly in winter. Never allow Fukien Tea to stand in water, or allow the soil to dry out completely.

Frequent misting will discourage spider mites, but will apparently encourage mealy bugs.

Feed weekly during Choose your poison! summer and monthly during winter. Use bonsai food or half strength plant food. Do not use Miracid. Fukien Tea does not like to be over fed.

Repot every 2-3 years in early spring. Reduce water after root pruning. Bottom heat helps stimulate root growth. Use basic soil mix. Beware of snapping thick roots – they are more brittle than they look. Prune new shoots after six to eight leaves have appeared. The leaves are tiny enough that leaf pruning should not be necessary. Fukien Tea can be wired anytime during the growing season, but is generally styled using the clip and grow method. It's small leaves and fine branch ramification make it ideal for miniature bonsai.

Aphids, scale, mealy bugs and red spider mites find this plant a special treat and will attack it over any other plants in the area. Unfortunately, it is very sensitive to insecticides. Diazinon will kill the tree. I use Neem oil or Orthonex III.

There are very few named cultivars of *Ehretia* sp. They are generally classified by leaf size, small, medium and large. They produce small, white flowers throughout the year and green berries that turn red when ripe.