



Tropical Bonsai Tasks in March:

Yes, I changed the name of this column. You know that I abhor the term 'indoor bonsai'. But while gathering information for this column, I was reminded that all bonsai that are grown indoors are not tropical. Hence the new name. This will now encompass all the various plants that are grown indoors as bonsai, tropical and otherwise.

As the days grow longer and warmer, we may begin to think of moving our bonsai out of doors. At this time of year, only think about it. Do not rush to get them outside. Remember that the temperature must remain above 50°F before taking them out. As the weather warms up and the heating season winds down, we should begin to see some new growth in these plants. As soon as you see this, switch to your summer feeding program.

One of the favored tropical bonsai is Camellia, *camellia* sp. The most famous member of the Camellia family is *C. sinensis*, the plant from which we get tea. Tea can be made from other camellia species but its flavor is not as desirable. These other species make showy bonsai, with beautiful flowers and shiny evergreen leaves. Most camellias flower from fall through early spring. When flower buds begin to appear, they are very delicate. They may fall off if the plant is moved, or if there is too great a variation in temperature or light.

Out of doors, they should be placed in full sun or partial shade in the afternoon. Indoors they thrive under artificial lights (14 to 16 hours). They require moderate watering, but as the root hairs are very fine, the plant CAN NOT be allowed to dry out completely. Increase watering when it is in active growth and when in bloom. It likes a occasional misting, but do not mist when it is in bloom as the flowers will wither. Feed weekly in summer and monthly during winter using a fertilizer like Miracid that is formulated for acid loving plants. Mix at half the recommended strength. Do not feed when the plant is in bloom. Augmenting this with chelated iron 2 or 3 times a year will also benefit the plant.

Styling may be done anytime from late spring through autumn. When wiring, wrap the wire with paper to protect the delicate bark. Do not work on the tree when it is setting buds as they dislodge very easily. Trim new shoots when they have developed 4-6 leaves back to 2 or 3 to establish branching. Pruning is best done after flowering, pruning just once and then allowing new shoots to set flower buds. Repot every 2-4 years in late winter or early spring, following blooming. Camellias like acidic, humus rich soil. The roots are superficial and fine, so drastic root pruning is not recommended, and best if only 10% of the roots are removed.

Camellias are bothered mostly by aphids, red spider mites and occasionally weevils. Also be on the lookout for sooty mold. Since it is an acid loving plant, chlorosis is a possibility.

The most widely grown species for bonsai is *Camellia japonica*. Because of their large leaves they are mostly grown as large bonsai. I have no experience in defoliating camellias to reduce the leaf size but it would be worth a try.

With its winter blooming time, it would certainly add color to this mostly drab time of the year. Worth a try ?