Chinese Elm Bonsai Care

Native to East Asia, Chinese Elms are one of the true “miniature trees” used in Bonsai. Few specimens have the look of a real tree than a well-sculpted Elm. The leaves of the Chinese Elm are small and leathery. The dark green color is shiny on the top with tiny blunt teeth. While the Chinese Elm is a beautiful tree, the bark is its most distinctive feature. Chinese Elms are a great choice for beginners at Bonsai because they’re very easy to take care of and have a predictable growth pattern. They’re very forgiving when pruned and are happy inside or outside.

LOCATION:

Chinese Elms are hardy, and can tolerate full sun or partial shade. Elms will tolerate indoor growth conditions as long as humidity levels remain reasonably high. An Elm that has been kept inside should not be put outside in the winter unless it goes through the gradual cooling of fall weather. While Elms can handle cooler temperatures, they should be brought inside if it gets below 20° F. An Elm may drop its leaves when it gets cold, and could even lose some of its small branches. In the spring, new growth will come back quickly.

WATERING:

Chinese Elm generally require good, year round watering, remaining moist without over watering. The more sunlight and warmth your Chinese Elm receives, the more often it will need water. More Bonsai die due to improper watering than any other cause. Check your Elm daily by sticking your finger into the soil. Do not water the tree if the soil is damp or cool. Chinese Elm generally need to be watered every couple of days, but there is no set schedule. When the topsoil feels dry, water thoroughly and deeply. An old
Bonsai watering trick is to place the entire pot in a sink of water an inch or two deep. Let the water absorb from the holes in the bottom of the pot. An inexpensive moisture meter takes the guesswork out of watering. We sell them.

**MISTING:**

Leaves want humidity to keep them green and healthy. Any time your tree is inside, the air is very dry. Mist often during the day. Avoid putting your Bonsai near a draft or vent, which dries out the foliage. A humidity tray is a great way to increase humidity. These shallow trays filled with small stones have water in the bottom of the tray. Make sure the water does not reach the bottom of the Bonsai pot. As the water evaporates, it creates a moister environment.

**FERTILIZING:**

Fertilizing a Bonsai is essential to its health because nutrients in the soil are washed away with each watering. Fertilizer is like vitamins and minerals for a plant. When new growth appears in the spring, it’s time to start feeding your Bonsai. Outdoor grown Chinese Elm should be fertilized once a week when the buds open in the spring. You can use a high nitrogen fertilizer for the first month and then use a balanced fertilizer every two weeks until late summer. Chinese Elms grown indoors should be fertilized with a balanced fertilizer every other week through the spring and summer, and monthly through the winter. Use an organic liquid fertilizer or a chemical fertilizer diluted to one half strength. Water your tree BEFORE fertilizing. DO NOT FERTILIZE A WEAK OR FRESHLY REPOTTED TREE! This will cause stress to the tree by burning the roots.

**PRUNING:**

To keep a Bonsai miniature, it needs to be trimmed and pruned as new growth appears. Never remove all the new growth at one time. One of the main attractions of Elms is the great contrast between a thick trunk and the very fine growth at the tips of the branches. Shape is determined by the overall look that you want to achieve. Sit at eye level with your Bonsai tree and use Bonsai trimming shears. Allow shoots to extend 3 or 4 nodes then prune back to 1 or 2 leaves as required. Your cuts should be smooth or slightly concave so the wound will heal quickly. If the cut surface is brown, add pruning paint to the surface. Pruning can be done anytime but, late summer and autumn pruning will reduce scarring.

**WIRING:**

Good wiring techniques are used to train Bonsai trees into different shapes and styles. Wiring should be done in the spring through mi-summer. Use the thinnest training wire that will hold the branch in the desired position. DO NOT WIRE A BONSAI JUST AFTER REPOTTING. Wind the training wire in the direction the branch is bent in order to keep
the wire from loosening. Wrapping the wire too tightly will cause scarring. Wrap just tight enough to get the job done. Begin at the base of the Bonsai tree and slowly wrap the wire around the trunk to anchor. Continue along the branch you wish to train. Repeat the process as needed. After about 6 weeks, the branch should be able to maintain the shape on it’s own, and the wire can be removed. Cut the wire carefully from the branch. DO NOT UNWIND WIRES. This could cause the branch to break.

REPOTTING:

A Bonsai should be repotted periodically to supply the plant with fresh soil. When the roots can be seen growing out the sides of the Bonsai container…it’s time. You should repot a Chinese Elm every 1-3 years, in the spring. Elms have very strong and vigorous root systems and won’t fare well if they become root bound. After repotting, water thoroughly. DO NOT FERTILIZE FOR 3-4 WEEKS.

INSECTS & DISEASE:

Insects such as aphids, leafhoppers and gall mites are common Chinese Elm pests. Young trunks can develop Cankers if the soil is kept excessively wet. These can be attacked with the use of insecticides and fungicides in the form of sprays, soapy rinses, or systemic poisons. Spraying your Bonsai once every month or two with a non-toxic insect spray is recommended. Soaps should be rinsed of the next day. DO NOT SPRAY WHEN SOIL IS DRY. The Chinese Elm is resistant to the deadly Dutch Elm disease that other Elms are susceptible to.