

Chinese Elm Bonsai

(*Ulmus parvifolia*)

The Chinese Elm is a top choice for beginners in bonsai due to its strength, adaptability, and forgiving nature (within limits!). It is important not to mix up Chinese Elms with Zelkovas, as they belong to distinct species and Zelkovas are more resilient to winter conditions. Chinese Elms are characterized by small, serrated leaves and can develop intricate, twiggy branches, which is advantageous for bonsai cultivation. These trees thrive best outdoors during the summer months, although they are not exclusively indoor or outdoor plants.



Water

Each bonsai tree requires a unique watering schedule due to their tendency to dry out quickly in coarse soil and shallow containers. The frequency of watering is influenced by factors such as the tree species, pot size, soil type, climate, and more. To determine if a bonsai needs water, check the soil moisture by inserting your finger about half an inch into the soil. If the top half inch feels dry, it is time to water.

When watering, thoroughly soak the bonsai by either letting it sit in water until it absorbs enough through the drainage holes or showering it from above to ensure even moisture distribution. Avoid letting the soil dry out completely or keeping it constantly saturated. Base your watering on the soil's moisture level, and if unsure, check periodically after watering to observe how the soil dries.

Regularly assess the bonsai's moisture level by feeling the soil daily. If moisture is detected, hold off on watering, unless the tree is in a small pot, experiencing hot or windy conditions, or is root-bound. When watering, pay attention to dry areas and ensure all parts of the soil receive adequate moisture. Remember, it is crucial to prevent the bonsai from becoming too dry to maintain its health and vitality.



Light

Chinese Elms are capable of thriving in full sunlight. It is important to ensure that the tree's leaves have become accustomed to sunlight before placing it in intense sun exposure. If the tree has been kept indoors, it should be gradually introduced to sunlight to prevent leaf burn. Once the leaves have adjusted, Chinese Elms

flourish in full sunlight, and ample sun exposure also contributes to keeping the leaves smaller.



Proper air circulation is crucial for the well-being of your bonsai. It is recommended to always place your Chinese Elm in a well-ventilated area, such as near an open window when indoors, or utilize a small fan to enhance air flow.



When your bonsai begins to produce new, pale-green foliage, it is time to commence fertilizing. Use a gentle organic fertilizer in either pellet or liquid form, typically with an equal mix of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK) throughout the growing season, and reduced nitrogen content in autumn. Apply the pellets once per month and the liquid every two weeks. As the tree's growth rate decreases, typically in mid to late summer, you can reduce the liquid fertilizer frequency to once a month. During the bonsai's winter dormancy period, refrain from fertilizing. It is important to note that fertilizing should never be done on a tree that is in a weakened state.



Chinese Elm trees are highly adaptable to their surroundings. With proper adjustment, they can thrive indoors throughout the year. By gradually acclimating them to colder temperatures, they can shed their leaves in autumn and be classified as deciduous trees, providing you with various cultivation options. However, it is crucial to understand the growth history of your Elm tree. Some Elm varieties originate from southern China and have never encountered cold weather conditions. Subjecting these Elms to extreme cold during the initial years could be harmful. Conversely, other Elm species have endured freezing temperatures and leaf shedding for many years, making them less suited for indoor environments initially. If you are unsure of your Elm's origin, it is advisable to keep it outdoors during the summer and bring it indoors for the winter when temperatures drop to around 50°F. When overwintering indoors, it is best to place the tree in a cooler spot, ideally between 50°F and 65°F. Chinese Elms may

naturally shed some leaves in winter due to reduced light exposure, which is a normal occurrence.



Cleanliness

As your bonsai matures, it will naturally drop some leaves. Regularly remove any dead leaves from both the tree and the topsoil, and gently shower the foliage once a week. This practice can help prevent pests and diseases.



Pests & Diseases

Just like children can catch a cold, bonsai trees are vulnerable to common houseplant pests and diseases. The key defense is to maintain cleanliness and ensure the tree's overall health. Regularly monitor your bonsai closely. Chinese Elms are particularly prone to a fungal disease known as black spot, which manifests as dark spots on the leaves and requires treatment. Use a fungicide (following instructions carefully) and remove any leaves that are more than half damaged. Provide good air circulation and sunlight for the bonsai, avoid misting, and be prepared to treat the tree multiple times if needed. If you observe abnormal leaf drops, stickiness on the foliage, or visible insects, act promptly. Start by showering the tree with lukewarm water to eliminate insects, then apply a mild insecticidal soap or rotenone pyrethrin spray (adhering to instructions). One treatment may not be sufficient, so you may need to repeat the process weekly for two to three weeks. While insects may initially be controlled, they could return after a few weeks or months. Stay vigilant and diligent in addressing any issues that arise. If in doubt, seek advice from a professional at the earliest indication of a problem.



Repotting

The safest time to repot your Chinese Elm is when you see a lot of buds just starting to swell. The time will vary from tree to tree, and from year to year. Even if your Elm has not dropped all its leaves, this is the best way to tell when it is ready to transplant. Frequency of repotting depends on the size and age of the tree, the condition of the roots, and other factors. A younger tree may need transplanting every year. Older trees or those in larger pots, may need repotting every two to

four years. Repotting is an important procedure which usually involves root pruning and must be done properly. We can help you with this. You can also take a workshop or consult a reliable book, bonsai hobbyist, or local bonsai club.



Pruning & Shaping

Chinese Elms exhibit rapid growth, allowing for efficient development of branch ramification within a short period. It is crucial to stay on top of trimming during the Elm's vigorous growth phases. Permit two or three new sets of leaves to emerge before trimming back to one or two sets. Avoid letting branches extend excessively unless intentional for thickening purposes. The frequency of trimming should align with the tree's growth rate, akin to giving a haircut when the foliage appears unruly. Strive to trim adequately to maintain a well-shaped tree without weakening it. Any sucker growth emerging at the base of the trunk or in the tree's bends can be pruned unless preservation of a specific branch or trunk formation in that region is desired. Major pruning tasks are typically conducted when the bonsai is at its peak strength, typically from early spring to early summer.



Desing & Styling

The most exquisite and captivating bonsai trees are those that exude a natural appearance. By studying aged trees in their original habitats, one can sense their distinct character and resilience. This natural aesthetic is the pinnacle that bonsai enthusiasts aim to achieve. Chinese Elms are versatile in terms of bonsai styling, accommodating assorted styles except for formal upright. Due to their rapid growth, younger Chinese Elm specimens can be shaped into forms like twisty trunks, cascades, semi-cascades, or even broom styles within a short timeframe.