

Post Potting Care

By Charlie Mosse, July 2023

Post potting care ranges from routine to some additional care, to intensive care, or somewhere in between. It depends on what you started with:

- Species is important. Some species re-pot better and/or recover faster than others.
- What's the health and vigor of the tree before repotting?
- What's the health and vigor of the roots before repotting?
- Time of the year: Are you in prime time or not for repotting the tree?
- Condition of the soil: Is it compacted and, if so, how badly? Can a sharp chopstick be pushed into the soil or is it very difficult or impossible to do so?
- Condition of the soil: Does the soil drain OK or very slowly? Is the existing soil nursery soil or bonsai soil?
- What percentage of the root ball was removed?
- Was the root ball downsized after re-potting into a smaller container, making watering more critical?
- Weather conditions at the time of re-potting, as well as the weather forecast for the next month or two.
- Proper re-potting procedures were followed: extraction from pot, root ball work, securing tree to pot, good soil mix, properly firming soil into pot and soil cover.
- Proper watering of the plant after re-potting.

With experience, you will come across various combinations of these factors. The aftercare you provide will vary depending on the combination of factors and the dominance of each factor. Common sense will make this determination fairly easy. If in doubt, provide a bit of extra care and ask ahead of time for advice.

The amount of roots to be removed is very important to know. It will depend on species, tree health, is re-potting being done in prime time or outside of prime time, anticipated weather conditions, condition of existing soil/root ball, and of course the desire/need to get the tree into a really cool but much smaller pot. All of these factors will determine the proper post-potting care for bonsai and pre-bonsai.

The soil in an existing root ball is generally hard to wet because the soil becomes more compacted over time. Repotting removes some of that hard soil but many times some has to remain. This old soil can be hard to wet vs the new soil which allows for faster drainage. This can lead to the water going through the new soil but barely wetting the old soil.

Watering properly is paramount after re-potting. To properly water a newly potted tree there are 3 basic methods:

- Repeated applications with the watering wand or nozzle, perhaps 3-5 times. Then visually check the old root ball (which is not always accurate) or probe with a water meter. The meter should work ok in the old soil but will not read accurately in the new soil, especially if the new soil mix is medium to coarse in particle size. The extra air spaces will yield a false reading. Finer particles yield better contact with the probe, therefore a better reading.
- After watering the soil with the wand or nozzle as above, turn the pressure down at the faucet to drip or a bit more depending on the size of the root ball. Drip water at 4 spots on the root ball about 3-5 min. at each spot. The rate of flow will be dependent on the size of the root ball.

This technique also works well for rootbound, compacted older root balls. This watering procedure is also great to do before a heat wave or a long period of normally hot weather.

- Dunk the pot in a tray. Lots of bubbles will rise from the new soil but will stop fairly quickly. If bubbles keep rising from the old soil, then the soil is still dry in some places. Keep submerged until the bubbles have stopped. This technique also works well for rootbound, compacted older root balls. Great to do before a heat wave or long period of normally hot weather.

The next very important thing to do is to place the tree in a proper location for the species, weather, time of year, the amount of root ball removed and health of the tree....

- Avoid full sun for approximately 4-8 weeks. Avoid mid-day sun from about 11-2. Filtered shade is ideal but not always available.
- If the weather stays cool and somewhat overcast, then more sun is better. Sometimes one needs to move a tree to maximize recovery.
- If a heat spike or prolonged heat wave occurs, you may need to move the tree to a cooler, shadier spot. Placing re-potted trees or unhealthy trees on the ground will reduce stress on the tree. Generally it is less windy and more humid. Wetting the soil around the tree is very beneficial.
-
- Avoid windy areas, but good air circulation is beneficial.
- Misting or sprinkling the foliage will also reduce the stress on re-potted trees. The cooling effect is only temporary but is helpful.

For trees in leaf, foliar feeding with SuperThrive, Miracle-Gro or fish/kelp can aid in the tree's recovery. It is not usually needed but some people like to do so, especially with trees that had more than the usual amount of root ball removed or were a bit unhealthy when re-potted. Follow label instructions for foliar feeding and, if you are concerned, cut that recommended concentration by at least half or do not foliar feed. Foliar feeding works for only a few days and the few nutrients that are absorbed are only utilized in the foliage and are not transported through the plant. Foliar feed twice a week, about every 3-4 days either in the early morning or late afternoon---morning it best.

After repotting, new roots do not start to re-grow for about 2-3 weeks for most species. As a result, moisture in the new soil, though it is important, is not being tapped due to the lack of new roots. You must be sure that when you are watering, the remaining portion of the original root ball absorbs moisture. Conifers take longer to start growing new roots than deciduous trees, broadleaf evergreens and warm weather species like ficus, olive, bougainvillea, and other topicals.

Fertilizing newly potted trees is not recommended. There is greatly reduced root activity with regards to absorbing water and nutrients. Most practitioners recommend waiting at least 3 weeks for faster responding trees and up to 5-6 weeks for most others like conifers. Once the roots heal, callous and then start initiating new root tips, then you can consider fertilizing. It is not necessary even then since the tree has stored a lot of energy in the fall and early winter to initiate and support early growth. If you are developing a tree, then fertilizing it as soon as it is safe is necessary. Whereas a tree in refinement, especially deciduous trees do not need fertilizing then.

If your repotted tree is healthy and a normal amount of root is removed, then after care and resumption of growth will be on schedule and minimal special care is required. If your tree was not healthy when re-potted, or more root ball than normal was removed, then recovery will take longer and utilizing some of the special procedures, as above, are recommended.

Be sure to properly wet the new bonsai soil. New soil can be a bit water repellent (hydrophobic), as can the old root ball. Being sure to water properly is very important.