

May Bonsai Tips

May in the Blue Ridge is late spring: expect vigorous growth, unpredictable weather, and the first real pest and fungus challenges. Trees need close attention to watering, fertilizing, and wiring. This is a month to prepare trees for summer while shaping the structure for the future.

Climate Watch

Late frosts still possible in early May. Be prepared to protect tender species.

Rain + humidity = fungal risk (leaf spot, mildew). Space trees out and thin dense foliage.

Strong sun by mid-May can scorch deciduous trees and Hinoki cypresses. Provide afternoon shade (30–40% cloth).

Rotation: Turn trees monthly for balanced growth.

Watering

Best time: Late morning (11–12). Morning is second-best. Avoid late evening to reduce fungal risk.

Check soil: Finger/chopstick test ~1 inch into corner. Akadama = light when dry, dark when wet.

White sphagnum moss (from NZ) over the soil surface conserves water.

Place small- and medium-sized bonsai on gravel trays to buffer dryness.

Root-over-rock: drape damp towel over stone on hot days.

Automatic watering: Avoid daily spray on foliage and needles, which can cause fungal attack.

Avoid overwatering (root rot, overly long needles). Don't let dry out either -- balance carefully.

Fertilizing

Trees in training: Heavy feeding. Large leaves/long internodes help thicken trunks.

Refined deciduous: Start fertilizing lightly once leaves harden. Overfeeding now = coarse growth.

Japanese Black Pine: Feed heavily in May. Keep well-watered; strong health ensures success with June decandling.

Japanese White Pine: Begin light feeding once new needles open (usually mid–late May).

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Mugo, Scots, Ponderosa: Feed moderately.

Cypress (Hinoki, Sawara, etc.): Feed moderately.

Tropicals: Feed regularly. In winter (if indoors under lights), continue light feeding; if growth slows naturally, reduce or pause.

Some Fertilizer Types:

- Fish emulsion liquid feed
- Organic cakes (rapeseed/cottonseed)
- Japanese Biogold
- Time-release (Osmocote) can supplement, but not within 4 weeks of repotting.

Seasonal Work

Deciduous

- Wiring (mid-May):
 - Best time to wire — sap is active, so small cracks heal quickly.
 - Use aluminum wire (easy to unwind, no staining).
 - For heavier branches, you can use copper wire if wrapped in paper.
 - Wire and trim at the same time; growth left will mature enough for flowers and fruit next year.
- Pinching: Trim back new shoots only after they extend; don't trim if the tree is weak.

Conifers

- Junipers:
 - Wire with copper.
 - Scale junipers (Shimpaku, Sierra, California): Trim back new shoots with scissors only after they extend, but don't trim if tree is weak.
 - Needle junipers: Cut soft shoots with scissors, leaving a little new growth.
 - San Jose/Procumbens (mixed foliage): Treat early growth like needle junipers, later growth like scale junipers.

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- Japanese Black Pine:
 - Water and fertilize strongly in May.
- Japanese White Pine:
 - Use less fertilizer than black pine.
 - Be very sensitive to water balance.
- Hinoki Cypress:
 - Growth comes in soft sprays. Cut new tips with sharp scissors in late spring through summer, but always leave some fresh green on each shoot.
 - Light trimming can be done 2–3 times per year. Avoid heavy pruning into old wood, as Hinoki does not bud back readily.
 - Open up dense areas so light and air can penetrate; this prevents interior dieback.
 - Protect from strong afternoon sun in hot climates to prevent foliage burn.
- Sawara Cypress:
 - Includes cultivars like ‘Boulevard’ and ‘Filifera.’
 - Soft, feathery foliage can brown inside if pads are too dense -- thin regularly.
 - Pinch new tips gently several times per season.

Tropicals

- Repotting: May is ideal; partial defoliation before repotting reduces stress.
- Outdoors: Harden off gradually once nights stay above 55–60°F (usually late May in Asheville).

Repotting

- The window closes by May for most temperate species.
- Tropicals: May marks the start of the best repotting period.

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Pest & Disease Protection

Pests

Begin monthly sprays now as a preventative. Watch for:

- Scale on bark (difficult to spot and to treat)
- Azalea lace bug (stippled leaves, shiny black spots beneath).
- Spider mites: check junipers with a white paper test.
- Bagworms: remove immediately.
- Pine Sawfly Larvae (clusters of greenish “caterpillars” eating needles).
- Pine Needle Scale (white, oyster-shell-like scales on needles).

Merit granules with imidacloprid can be sprinkled on soil surface as a systemic preventative.

Diseases

Use appropriate sprays or drenches for these diseases:

- Deciduous
 - Black Spot (dark round spots, yellowing leaves)
 - Powdery Mildew (white powdery coating, distorted new growth)
- Junipers
 - Phomopsis Tip Blight (brown tips on new shoots)
- Pines
 - Needle Cast (needles turn yellow, then brown with dark bands or spots)
- Other Conifers (Cryptomeria, Hinoki, etc.)
 - Foliage Blight / Browning

Display & Pot Care

- May is a prime season for show trees.
- Groom canopies, clean nebari, and refresh moss (thin layer, not a thick blanket).
- Clean pots: dilute vinegar to remove lime; use light oil on unglazed surfaces. If needed, add more display tables to your collection.

Summary

- Water wisely: late morning is best; moss and gravel trays help retain moisture.
- Fertilize: Pines (especially Japanese Black Pines) heavily; refined deciduous lightly after leaves harden.

May Bonsai Tips

- Wire deciduous trees in mid-May: sap flow makes healing quick; generally, use aluminum wire.
- Tropicals: Repot now; partial defoliation helps recovery. Move outdoors when nights stay above 55°F.
- Rotate trees monthly for even growth.
- Start pest and disease sprays now.
- Prepare for show season — May bridges April's "wake-up" and June's "candle work." Careful watering, strong fertilization, and smart wiring now set trees up for healthy summer growth.