

## View from Here #2

### Thoughts on Bonsai Soil

By Jack Wikle

Like the blind men exploring an elephant, our bonsai world still gropes in making soil mix decisions. Confusing? You bet! But it's interesting too.

- "Turface is a very useful product. You are missing an opportunity if it isn't part of your soil mix."
- "No! Turface holds too many salts. Don't use it."
- "Many trees grow just fine in straight Turface with nothing added."
- "I don't use Turface. It turns to mush."
- "I've used a lot of Turface and never seen it disintegrate."
- "Pay the price for akadama soil imported from Japan because it is unquestionably superior to anything produced in this country."
- "Most trees don't grow in bark so don't use bark in your mix."
- "I use a lot of bark --- at least 50 or 60 percent and sometimes more --- in my mixes and I am very happy with the health of my bonsai."

Certainly, in listening to all the contradictory advice offered both by visiting artists and experienced AABS members, it would be easy to conclude that it really doesn't make much difference what one uses. My personal view is that this is not true.

I still believe some combinations are clearly superior to others. And, even though people get by with a surprising variety of mixes, further examination will reveal that the most successful are all using mixes that drain quickly admitting a lot of air almost immediately after watering. In short, the good soil mix holds water and lets air in at the same time. (If you wonder how to tell how much air your soil admits after draining, ask me for a handout sheet outlining a procedure for making some simple porosity and water retention measurements. I'll have copies available next meeting.)

Some readers know that I've been in the habit of joking a lot about having "secret soil mixes." The thinking was that listeners would be more likely to pay attention and take my ideas seriously. Now, I find myself in the curious position of the college professor in the old joke who used the same test questions for twenty years --- always changing the answers to keep his students off balance.

Like most people who grow plants in containers, I've kept tinkering, experimenting, with my soil mixes always hoping for improvement but realizing at the same time that finding a panacea is very unlikely. The result of this has been some change in what I do personally, mostly a gradual shift toward mixes that admit more and more air immediately after watering.

### **“New” Secret Recipes:**

The experimenting continues but, to bring readers up-to-date, it seems timely to offer here a couple of new “secret mixes” I am excited about today. If you try either of these in comparison with your present favorite mix, I would appreciate hearing what happens.

#### 1-1-4 Standard Mix

- 1 part (volume) chicken grit (starter size)
- 1 part sphagnum peat (rubbed through a 4 mesh – 4 openings per inch -- screen to break up lumps and eliminate overly large stuff, then shaken quickly over window screen to get rid of some of the dust)
- 4 parts Turface MVP, fired clay particles produced for athletic field and golf course use (shaken quickly over window screen to get rid of some of the dust)

#### 2-3 Standard Mix

- 2 parts Southland Pine Bark Soil Conditioner, a product of Southern Importers, Inc. (shaken over a 4 mesh screen to eliminate overly large stuff)
- 3 parts Turface MVP (shaken quickly over window screen to get rid of some of the dust)

Note: You can check with other members about sources for these products, but one business where I have purchased both Turface MVP and Pine Bark Soil Conditioner is Abbott’s Landscape Nursery on Scio Church Rd. at the southwest corner of Ann Arbor.

### **Clippings:**

“Bonsai is horticulture, first and foremost. No matter how beautifully formed, a dead stick in a gob of mud is not a bonsai. After the requirements for the living organism have been set, it is time to look to expression.”

Kay Cheever, “The Tableau of Bonsai,” *Bonsai: Journal of The American Bonsai Society*, Summer 1992.

“Art in bonsai may be defined as the visual interpretation and technical application of a series of intellectual processes, based on a number of aesthetic criteria in the pursuance and expression of a fertile and creative idea. Then again, it may not!”

Dan Barton, “Driftwood Bonsai,” *Bonsai [UK]*, No. 30, Summer 1996