



Chinese Elms are a popular beginner's bonsai tree; they are among the most widely sold specimens by bonsai nurseries and in garden centres selling bonsai.

This care note is intended to provide you with very basic guidance on how to maintain the tree. For more specific support, we would advise you to either join us at our regular meetings or visit a bonsai specialist offering lessons.

The Chinese Elm, *Ulmus parvifolia*, is native to Eastern Asia. Although many varieties are cold-hardy, in Britain it is considered a tropical tree and commonly referred to as an indoor bonsai tree. While the tree will tolerate indoor conditions, you should note that this is a tolerance and not ideal conditions for the tree. If the bonsai is to survive indoors, it is important to increase the humidity local to the tree by placing it on a gravel tray. The tree will need good light, but will not survive continuous direct sunlight like that on a south-facing windowsill. Depending on the conditions, it will require regular watering; in the winter this might be as seldom as once a week, in the summer this might be as frequent as twice a day. You will need to observe the dryness of the soil and ensure that the tree does not dry out completely; continuous dampness is the objective. Over-watering will kill the tree as fast as under-watering.

## Re-potting

Chinese Elms are usually re-potted in the spring. As the re-potting of any tree causes it a degree of stress, you should water it more carefully and delay any feeding for a week to ten days to avoid root damage.

## Position

Your tree will be very happy outdoors for the majority of the year, only requiring protection from the wind and direct sun. As winter approaches, ensure that the tree is protected from frosts, as some varieties of Chinese Elm are not frost hardy. If you keep the tree indoors, keep it on a gravel tray to increase humidity and place the tree where it will get good daylight. DO NOT place it on a radiator shelf, TV, or a windowsill where rapid and/or extreme temperatures are likely. If you normally keep the tree indoors, consider giving it a summer holiday outdoors.

## Watering

Watering bonsai trees is one of the key factors in managing bonsai. When watering, water heavily until the water is running through the whole depth of the soil. The soil should then be allowed to dry to a dry dampness — NOTE dry dampness, not bone dry — before watering again. The tree will need looking after 365 days a year even when you are on holiday.

## Feeding

If your tree is to maintain its health and vigour you will need to feed it regularly. A variety of feeds are available for your tree; these fall into two types and two methods. The choice of types is either organic or chemical; we prefer organic feeds because they are less likely to burn the roots. The methods of application are either slow release or liquid. Feeding with an organic slow-release fertiliser is the easiest, but should be supplemented with regular liquid applications. Follow the manufacturers' instructions.

This note simplifies a very complicated area of bonsai culture.

## Pruning

There are two objectives to pruning a bonsai: firstly is shape, secondly is developing the density of the tree's pads. Chinese Elms are often styled to have a series of pads around the trunk and these are maintained by pruning any branches that start to extend into adjacent pads. One common method of maintaining the density of the pads is by

allowing new growth to extend initially to at least three or four pairs of leaves and then cutting back to leave two pairs. This is almost a continuous process through the growing season.

A similar method is to allow the terminal shoot (the strongest shoot at the end of a twig) to extend fully, then cut back to at least two shoots (not leaves), depending on the shape you are trying to achieve.

## Further Help

Come and join one of our meetings at Eastleigh Bonsai Society or contact one of your local bonsai nurseries. The craft of growing bonsai trees is a fascinating one, and people are only too willing to give advice.

As in all disciplines, advice will sometimes contradict. None is specifically right or wrong; ideas will differ and be more applicable in some areas rather than other. Experiment and find out which advice works for you.