MOVING CHALLENGES: Changing the Potting Medium of a Bonsai

There are many reasons why we would need to move a bonsai out of the potting medium it is currently growing in: possibly because the soil mix is too heavy, or too free-draining, or it doesn't suit one's watering style.

This could be the case when one inherits a tree from someone else, or if the tree was bought from a garden centre and needs to be moved into a more free-draining soil, for example.

In this particular case, the bonsai needing an intervention is a Satsuki Azalea. It was grown from a cutting acquired at the 1996 Satsuki Azalea national exhibition in Plymouth. Its first owner had been one of the earliest members of Eastleigh Bonsai Society, who later had to give up their collection due to ill health.

In 2004, this Satsuki Azalea went to a new home, and needed to acclimatise to its new surroundings. After very many years, the potting medium it was in eventually started to show signs of degrading. Its owner decided to move the plant into *kanuma*, which is a Japanese soil popular with bonsai growers of Satsuki.

When a full change of potting medium is involved, some plant species are better off with this process being done in stages. Pines are one of these, as care needs to be given not to decimate the mycorrhiza in their roots.

Satsuki Azaleas are another; it's been observed that they don't respond well when being taken out of a peat-based compost and fully transplanted into *kanuma*. So, to ease the plant into this transition, wedges are cut out of the root ball, which are filled with the new soil. The roots then grow into the new medium, and at the next re-potting, the remaining few wedges are replaced with the new soil as well.

The Satsuki was therefore re-potted in 2018, when the first wedge-cutting technique was applied. With careful watering and a good fertilisation regime, it responded well, grew strongly and flowered profusely.

Here is where we are with this story in the Summer of 2019…

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This Satsuki Azalea is a medium-sized tree that flowers quite heavily. It's believed to be the variety 'Kaho' which has multiple-coloured blooms.

Due to the size—and profusion—of the flowers, light could not penetrate, causing considerable die-back inside the tree.

Pruning was done later than originally expected. Due to the extent of the die-back, pruning this Summer was very light. A heavier prune will be done in the Spring when the growth has recovered.

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Soil inspection is also done at the same time. After the remaining moss was removed, it was noticed that the roots in the peat mix were not doing as well as those in the *kanuma*.

Note the wetter, darker areas where the peat mix is.

More re-potting is in store next year, to remove the last of the peat-based compost.

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The top soil layer was refreshed with a mix of *kanuma*, kyodama (a high-fired ceramic grit) and finely chopped sphagnum moss.

In wetter climates, a free-draining medium like *kanuma* can be preferred, although a lot also depends on the the microclimate surrounding the bonsai, the way it's watered, etc.

Kyodama helps with drainage, and Satsukis seem to respond well to the sphagnum moss in the compost.

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Finally, a top dressing of damp, chopped sphagnum moss was laid and tamped down on the dampened soil. This layer of moss helps protect the fine roots at the top surface of the soil from drying out. Fresh seed moss was also added into the sphagnum.

The Aftercare Regime:

Keeping humidity levels high will help this Satsuki Azalea send out new shoots, so it will be misted during dry, hot days. At the same time over-watering will also need to be avoided, to encourage strong root growth.

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