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Ponderosa Pine as Bonsai

Patrick Allen, Membership Chair

Of the bonsai trees I have in my collection, my favorite is a Ponderosa Pine – *Pinus ponderosa*. It's a visually majestic tree with still needle-like foliage, rugged bark, and limber branches. I find it characteristic of the Colorado Rocky Mountains from which it originated and think of our Rockies when I look at it.

Pinus ponderosa trees are found throughout the mountainous region from northern Mexico to British Columbia at altitudes of 3,000 to 10,000 feet. It is a preponderate tree in the Colorado Rocky Mountains and can grow up to 60-125 feet. When developed as a bonsai they need moderate care compared to other bonsai trees.



Ponderosa Pine – 175 to 200 Years Old
Pinus ponderosa – In Training Since 2013
Tokoname Pot

Acquiring

My *Pinus ponderosa* was collected in 2012 by RMBS Todd Schlafer - RMBS Artist of the Year (2010) and a nationally recognized bonsai professional. He is also the owner of [First Branch Bonsai](#) in Lakewood Colorado. Todd collected the tree in Northern Colorado's Red Feathers Lake region. I bought tree in 2013 and repotted it into a Tokoname bonsai pot. The Tokoname pot was purchased from Jim Gollmer, owner of [Bonsai Vision](#) out of St. George, Utah. Although expensive, I consider both of these purchases as investments into my bonsai hobby.

Pre-bonsai *Pinus ponderosa*s trees either bought on-line in specialized stores, purchased through bonsai professionals, bought during auctions at professional societies - like RMBS - or in nurseries. With a US Forest Service permit, I've successfully collected a couple of pre-bonsai Ponderosa pines. Permits were easy to obtain. It was special to go with others who have collected before, knew the ins and outs of collecting, and to discover a special tree that has been shaped by the elements. I found these treasures in a craggy granite mountainous area growing in crevasses. The trees were naturally stunted due to the harsh conditions they faced over the years and I saw them as excellent candidates for bonsai. Remember that collecting trees from the wild should be done responsibly and with permission. Some US Forest areas have regulations in place to protect the natural

environment, like the Limber Pine Grove in Park County Colorado. Permits are easily obtained for Pike-San Isabel National Forests at the South Park Ranger District in Fairplay Colorado.

Caring for the Ponderosa Pine Bonsai

Watering

Pinus ponderosa grow best in a dry setting and it works well if you can let the tree dry out between watering. Still, the roots must get sufficient water with this water/oxygen balance.

I use a free draining coarse soil mixture and water every other evening. If it is going to be a hot day, I protect the roots by covering the pot with a wet burlap cloth. Burlap can be purchased at any of the hobby stores which carries cloth, such as Michaels.

Repotting and Soil

My *Pinus ponderosa* has been repotted 3 times since I acquired it in 2013. I always watch for drainage to determine if I should repot it and I do it in the early spring so the tree is not overly stressed by the heat. The soil mixture I use is 1-1-1 of akadama-lava-pumice. These 3 substrates help me to increase things that work for me like nutrient retention, moisture retention and oxygen for the roots.

To keep the drainage high, I do not add bark fines like I do for my other bonsai trees. After repotting I submerge the pot in water to settle the soil. I strive to keep the pH around 7.0 – 7.5 and since Denver water has a pH of 8.8, I add some white vinegar, 1 tablespoon per gallon. This helps to decrease the pH. *Pinus ponderosa* pines are resilient and can grow in both acidic and alkaline soils.

Pinus ponderosa can grow in a minimum amount of soil. Its roots are hardy and can withstand Colorado's low winter temperatures. You do not have to provide any extra protection which is needed for other bonsai trees. I bury the pots and cover them with 4 inches of mulch. Do not forget watering your *Pinus ponderosa* during the winter to prevent its drying.

Sunlight

Pinus ponderosa love the sun and they are very heat tolerant. I have moved my tree to a west facing balcony where it will get about 8 to 10 hours of direct sunlight each day. I had it on the east side where it only got morning sun. I've noticed that the needles are long and leggy and it is not budding back. I'm hopeful that this move will make a difference. When I have repotted this tree, I have it in a semi-shaded area for a couple of weeks to help it during this stressful period.

Fertilizing

Because my tree is established, I start to fertilize in late summer and early fall. I want to enhance the back budding and this is the time of year to fertilize. Also, I want to ensure that it has enough nutrients to help it through the winter months. Applying fertilizer earlier in the year causes elongated needles.



I use BioGold™ fertilizer which contains several types of natural bacteria for a slow but steady release of organic nutrients without disrupting soil chemistry (NPK 5.5/6.5/3.5). Be careful using an excessive amount of nitrogen fertilizer. It can cause a tree to die! An organic fertilizer is preferred.

Wiring & Pruning

Pinus ponderosa can be wired throughout most of the growing season. I try to wire in the spring or late summer so I don't stress the tree during the hot summer months. Unlike my tropicals, I am not that concerned with scarring the tree since it grows so slowly. Wire will not scar the tree even if the wire is left on for several years. I use copper wire as it is strong and flexible and allows for easy handling of the branches without causing damage.

I only prune the tree during the fall because it helps with the following season's growth. I have found that pruning in the spring causes excessively long needles. If I prune in the fall, I do not repot in the spring. The tree needs to restore its resources. I subscribe to the saying "a tree should have only one insult each year." Only prune the Pinus ponderosa once a year.

Pests & Disease

I've found that my Ponderosa pine was susceptible to disease and that one season it was infected with a fungal infection causing "Needle Cast", a condition where some of the needles lost their green coloration and dropped some needles. Consulting with some of the senior RMBS and Visiting Artists, I treated the tree with Daconil Ready-to-Use Fungicide™ and within a couple of weeks saw some positive results.



Another thing that I like about my Ponderosa pine is its hardiness, providing that it has a healthy root ball – which mine does – is that it can fight diseases on its own. Still, diseases can cause severe damage to your tree if not cared for immediately. The most common are:

- Pine Needle Cast (Elytroderma Disease)
- Rust Diseases
- Red Rot
- Black Stain Disease

Again, to stave off diseases, ensure you have a strong root ball and that your watering practices are solid, e.g. good drainage and not over watering.

Pinus ponderosa: An ideal tree for Colorado

The Pinus ponderosa is native to Colorado and the Western United States. It has exceptional and beautiful bark, sturdy needle foliage, and ability to withstand the growing conditions we have in Colorado. It is easy to style because of its flexible limbs. They thrive in dry weather, and can withstand the swings we have in cold weather. A downside of the tree as a bonsai, is its long needles. This is a challenge, but can be managed with

proper management. The tree is rugged, like the Colorado Rocky Mountains which we enjoy.

For your enjoyment, the below listed are select *Pinus ponderosa* trees photos from RMBS members who showed trees at our 2023 Annual Show.







*Tree: Mike Britten
Photo: Mike Green*

*Tree: Andrew Chun
Photo: Mike Green*

*Tree: Allan Belmore
Photo: Mike Green*

Upcoming Events

Schedule



April Meeting

Tuesday, April 2

Gates Hall, DBG

7:00 PM

Ponderosa Pine Panel: Patrick Allen, Larry Jackel, Kevyn Young

Membership

Individual: \$50/year

Family: \$75/year

rmbonsai.org/join

Welcome to our new members!

Mike Stacey (Denver)

Jon Withers (Denver)

Bruce Ziegler (Colorado Springs)

Christopher Pulver-Evanick (Denver)



Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society

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