



THE TREE SHRINKER

Next EBBS Meeting: Jan 12, 2026

2026 EBBS Schedule

Regular Meetings

2nd Wednesday, every month

Jan 14 - Annual Repotting Party,
6:30pm

Feb 11 - Club meeting, Leslie Buck,
6:30pm

March: Randall Lee, Topic TBD
(might be Hinoki Cypress, Forest
Planting or Grafting)

April: Member Lightning Talks:

- Addison on Kokufu 100th Anniversary
- Michael S on Monterey Cypress from seed
- Lisa Harper on accent plants

Dues are Due!

It's that time again! If you joined after October 1, 2024, you're paid for 2025. Otherwise, you can pay dues in cash, check, or credit card. Drop off cash or check at the next meeting, or use the link on eastbaybonsai.org/membership to pay by credit card. You can also pay at any meeting via Square. Mail your dues to **East Bay Bonsai Society, c/o P. Cahill, 4933 Cochrane Ave, Oakland, CA 94618**. Annual dues remain the same:

- Single membership: \$30
- Family membership: \$40

Annual Repotting Party & Pot Swap

January is repotting time and we're going to kick off the year with one of our best club activities – repotting! We all have a lot of work to do the next couple of months, so everyone should have something to bring and work on. If you're new to bonsai, it's a great opportunity to learn this essential skill. If you're experienced, maybe you want to get opinions on a what pot to use for a tree, or picking a new front, or just to get your hands dirty with bonsai friends! So, bring a tree, tools, some wire and a pot and let's get potting! Bonsai soil will be available to purchase and we'll have wire on hand to secure your tree if you don't have any!

Thanks in advance to Wendy Quan and Mike Cullen for bringing refreshments to our January meeting.



Take Our Member Survey

Please take a few minutes and fill out our annual member survey. It's a great opportunity for you to voice your thoughts and ideas to the board, and gives them the data they need to plan meaningful club activities throughout the year. You can access it online at

<https://form.jotform.com/253098485637168>

News from The Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt

Volunteer at the Garden!

The Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt is seeking new volunteer docents. It's a chance to deepen your bonsai knowledge, share your passion, and spend time in a peaceful, inspiring setting.

Some reasons to volunteer or become a docent

- Learn from seasoned bonsai experts and fellow club members.
- Gain hands-on experience in bonsai care and garden upkeep.
- Work among one of the most historic bonsai collections in the U.S.
- Introduce newcomers to this "hidden gem" of Oakland.
- Support the garden's mission to teach the art and science of bonsai.
- Join a fully volunteer-run organization.
- Help preserve a beloved community treasure for future generations.

To volunteer or learn more, visit the [Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt website](#) or speak with a current docent.

Mammoth Fundraiser - Trees Needed!



The Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt will start accepting trees beginning November 4, 2025, for the Mammoth Fundraiser auction scheduled for March 7, 2026.

This is a great opportunity to support the garden while finding new homes for trees that no longer fit your collection. All proceeds benefit the Bonsai

Garden's maintenance and educational programs.

Please make an appointment with Suzanne Muller to discuss a time to meet, review your trees, and fill out paperwork. Contact Suzanne by text at 925-787-1349 or send her an email at queueinteriors@comcast.net

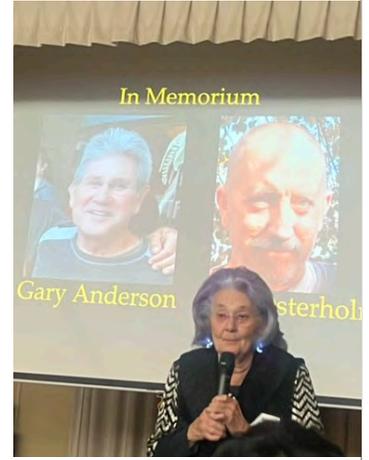
The 2025 Holiday Party!



This year's holiday party was one of our best! There was chicken! There was ham! So much great food! We celebrated an incredible year of bonsai with tiny Christmas trees and big friendships! Janet Harper and Janet Nelson did an incredible job pulling together a slide show with memories from throughout the year. There was also some great show-and-tell from a number of members.



Thanks to everyone for making it a special event and especially to the Board for making 2025 a year to remember! Let's have a great 2026! Enjoy these photos from the event on the following pages!





Can ChatGPT Help You With Bonsai?

(A true story involving fungus, rain, and a surprisingly knowledgeable robot)

If you'd asked me a month ago whether ChatGPT could help with bonsai, I probably would've said something polite and noncommittal – the digital equivalent of nodding while slowly backing away from the bench.

Then I had a pine trying very hard to die.

What followed was a multi-day, weather-dependent, chemistry-heavy, emotionally confusing bonsai crisis. And, improbably, ChatGPT was there for all of it.

This article is not about replacing experience, intuition, or club elders who've been wiring trees since Nixon. It's about how AI can act as a **calm, informed second brain** when your trees (and the forecast) are actively gaslighting you.

Fungus, Panic, & Doom Spirals

It started innocently enough:

Me: "I am trying to get rid of *Phomopsis* on a pine bonsai. I have *Heritage* fungicide. How do I apply?"

Google would have sent me into a PDF rabbit hole written for golf courses in Florida. ChatGPT, instead, said (paraphrased, but accurate in spirit):

ChatGPT: "You're dealing with the right disease. You've got a legit fungicide. But bonsai has small margins for error – so application matters."

That set the tone. Not magic. Not vague. Practical, specific, and bonsai-aware.

Where It Got Interesting: Context + Memory

As the conversation went on, the questions got more specific – and more bonsai-real:

Me: "It is granular. Will it dissolve in water?"

ChatGPT: "Yes – but it won't melt like sugar. It's a water-dispersible granule. If you just dump it in, you'll get sad green gravel at the bottom."

That line alone earned its keep.

But the real value showed up when things got messy. Multiple trees. Different species. Different disease stages. Two fungicides. Rain every day forever.

Me: "I have one pine that has very advanced disease and one with just a small amount of needles starting to go brown. I also have *Cleary 3336*. What should I do with each?"



Instead of a generic answer, I got a **triage plan**. Different strategies for different trees. Product rotation. Timing. What not to do (often more important than what to do).

This is where AI shines: holding a lot of variables in its head without getting flustered.

Bonsai-Specific Stuff That Impressed Me

Here are a few moments that convinced me this wasn't just fancy autocomplete:

- It correctly advised **leaving half-green needles alone** because they were still feeding buds.
"Those ugly needles are life support."
- It stopped me from overusing thiophanate-methyl (*Cleary 3336*) when I panicked about symptoms returning.
"This is lagging symptom expression, not failure."
- It adjusted recommendations when I corrected another species ID as a pygmy cypress.
This actually makes restraint even more important."
- It understood weather reality better than my weather app.
"Act on conditions, not forecasts."

How to Repot a Trident Maple Bonsai

This guide is adapted from Jonas Dupuich's comprehensive article at [Bonsai Tonight](#). We're grateful to Jonas for sharing his expertise with the bonsai community.

TIMING: For most deciduous and conifers, we repot in December through February in the Bay Area (tropicals are repotted in summer).

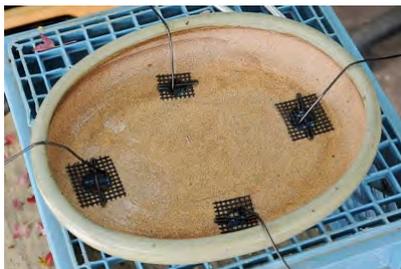


On [Peter Tea's website](#), he points out, "Due to our mild winters, it can make a difference repotting in December vs February. It all comes down to how fast you want the Bonsai to grow. Repotting in December generally yields a strong Spring push whereas repotting in February slows down

the Spring push. The difference is not huge but can be enough to affect how refined tree. (Note: While techniques here apply broadly, repotting timing varies by species—check requirements for your specific tree.)

Removing the Tree from its Pot

Cut all tie-down wires and drainage screen clips from underneath the pot. Using a small sickle or sod knife, carve a narrow channel between the rootball and pot sides, working on two short sides and one long side. Scrape all the way to the bottom where roots tend to circle. Tip the rootball away from the pot carefully to avoid damaging branches.



Preparing the Pot

Scrub the pot lightly to remove loose dirt while preserving patina—don't be overzealous. Cover drainage holes with screen secured by wire clips bent into a "Z" shape (people will tell you seven different ways to secure screens—all that matters is that screens are secure). Thread tie-down wires through drainage holes, leaving them loose for later securing.

Working the Roots

Using a root rake, comb out the bottom of the rootball from center outward, keeping the rake parallel to the base to avoid air pockets. Cut roots leaving a small stub extending from the rootball to help integration with new soil.



On top and sides, use bent-nose tweezers held at a low angle to avoid snagging roots. Remove old organic fertilizer residue from the surface. Cut roots just past where they emerge from the soil. The goal is firm roots on a flat base.

Setting the Tree

Add a pumice drainage layer (optional in warm climates), then add a mound of bonsai soil in the pot center. Nestle the tree into position. Before securing with wire, take time to check everything: the tree's location in the pot, the height of the rootball, the front you've chosen, and the angle or tilt of the trunk. This is your chance to make adjustments that will affect the tree's presentation for years to come.

Connect tie-down wires around the rootball, adding a "tail" wire to the first connection for the final twist. When using pliers for the last connection: pull taut, then twist—this technique tightens all connections and prevents wire breakage.

Finishing

Pour soil into the pot, working it between roots with chopsticks to eliminate air pockets. Gently bump the pot once or twice to settle soil. Level the surface with a brush held nearly parallel to the soil, or pat down with your fingers.



Water immediately until water runs clear—this removes fine particles and improves drainage. If drainage is poor after watering, the tree needs to be repotted again.

For the complete step-by-step tutorial with detailed photos and additional tips, visit [Jonas's original article at \[bonsaitonight.com\]\(#\)](#). You can also buy all the supplies you'll need on [Jonas's site!](#)



Bonsai Calendar

- During the winter most trees are dormant or semi-dormant. That means it's time to repot – just about any kind of trees except tropicals.
- You can also do air/ground layering this time of year.
- It's a good time to restyle conifers too. Cut, thin and wire.
- **Do one of these (repot, air layer, or restyle), not all three to any one tree!** It can be too stressful if you overdo it.
- Cut and trim small wire that's biting into trees.

Refer to EBBS Bonsai Seasonal guide for more info on care.

At one point, after refreshing the forecast for the tenth time, I typed:

Me: *"The weather report keeps changing."*

The response:

ChatGPT: *"Bay Area weather apps love to gaslight gardeners."*

I felt seen.

What ChatGPT Is (and Isn't) Good At for Bonsai

It's good at:

- Translating label-speak into bonsai-scale reality
- Sequencing actions (what now, what later, what never)
- Keeping you from overreacting
- Explaining *why* something matters, not just *what* to do
- Being available when it's raining, dark, and your club group chat is asleep

It's not good at:

- Replacing hands-on experience
- Seeing subtle cues you don't photograph or mention
- Making aesthetic decisions
- Owning the consequences (that part's still on you)

Think of it less as a sensei and more as a very well-read benchmate who never gets tired.

The Real Value: Emotional Regulation

This might be the most underrated benefit.

Bonsai problems don't just challenge technique – they challenge judgment. When something goes wrong, the temptation is to *do more*. Spray again. Cut more. Change everything.

Having a calm, reasoned voice say:

"Overcorrecting is now the bigger risk than under-treating."

...is sometimes the difference between recovery and compost.

So... Can ChatGPT Help With Bonsai?

Yes – if you use it the right way:

- Ask good questions.
- Provide context.
- Correct it when needed.
- Treat it like a collaborator, not an oracle.

It certainly won't replace decades of experience. But it *can* help you avoid unforced errors, especially when you're juggling disease, pests, weather, and your own anxiety. And if nothing else, it's nice to have someone tell you, with confidence:

"Heritage today. Then hands off."

Sometimes that's exactly what a tree – and its owner – need to hear.

(And yes, I collaborated with AI to write this article)

– by Adam Kleinberg and ChatGPT

Club T-Shirts!

Interested in an EBBS shirt? They are now available for purchase at <https://east-bay-bonsai-society.myspreadshop.com/>. Please email Freddie at fjwinter@yahoo.com with questions.

Join the conversation!

facebook.com/groups/ebbs

facebook.com/groups/ebbsmembers

instagram.com/eastbaybonsai/

twitter.com/EastBayBonsai

www.eastbaybonsai.org

Member Ads

Each member can run a free ad in the newsletter once a year. Email Adam at adam@tractionco.com to submit yours.

Newsletter Contributors

Editor: Adam Kleinberg

Contributors: Bev Martinez, Adam Kleinberg, Jonas Dupuis, ChatGPT

Photography: Adam Kleinberg, Jonas Dupuis

Upcoming Bonsai Events

Fresno Bonsai Society 48th Annual Show

November 15-16, 2025, 10am-5pm (Sat), 10am-4pm (Sun)
Fresno Fairgrounds, 1121 S Chance Ave, Fresno, CA

San Francisco Suiseki Kai Annual Show

December 6-7, 2025
County Fair Building, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco

Baikoen Bonsai Kenkyukai 62nd Annual Winter Silhouette Exhibition

January 17-18, 2026, 10am-4:30pm
Arboretum of Los Angeles County, 301 N Baldwin Ave, Arcadia, CA

Bay Area Bonsai Associates 44th Annual Exhibit

January 17-18, 2026
Lakeside Garden Center, 666 Bellevue Ave, Oakland, CA
Saturday 5-9pm, Sunday 10am-4:45pm. Demonstration Saturday at 6:30pm. Free admission.

GSBF Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt Mammoth Auction & Sale

March 7-8, 2026, 11am-3pm
Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt, 666 Bellevue Ave, Oakland