Beech care calendar

Fagus sylvatica · outdoor · RHS H6: hardy in the ground; in a pot the fine roots need shelter from hard, windy frost, and the papery winter leaves need protection from drying wind more than from cold · USDA 6b/7a · timings for a temperate northern climate

Root & Wire · https://rootandwire.com/bonsai/care/beech/ · a rule-of-thumb plan, not a guarantee; your garden varies

January

Dormant, with last year's copper leaves still on. Keep the pot outside in a sheltered spot, and on the ground, against a wall or in a cold frame for spells of hard frost with wind; the fine roots and the retained leaves both suffer when the pot is frozen and the air is dry. Check the soil is damp weekly. No work on the tree.

Basis (rhs): RHS: Fagus sylvatica plant page (hardiness H6); RHS advice: overwintering container plants

February

Any structural cuts are made now, sealed, and kept to the minimum, because beech heals slowly and the smooth bark shows every scar. Wire young shoots now, before the buds swell, with the wire checked monthly through the season. Late in the month, pull the old leaves off by hand to show the structure and let light in to the inner buds; a tree collected from a hedge is lifted now, with every fine root you can keep.

Basis (reference): Harry Harrington, bonsai4me.com species guide (Fagus sylvatica): late-winter pruning and wiring; leaf removal before bud swell; general practice

March

Repot as the long buds swell and show green at the tip, every two or three years for a young tree, four or five for an old one. Be gentle with the roots: comb them out and remove no more than a quarter on an established tree; beech recovers slowly from hard root work. Keep the tree out of wind and frost for a month afterwards. No feed until the leaves have hardened.

Basis (reference): Peter Chan, Bonsai Masterclass (repotting deciduous trees at bud swell); bonsai4me.com on cautious root pruning of beech

April

The one flush of the year opens. As each shoot extends and shows three or four leaves, pinch it back to two on the strong upper shoots and let the weak lower ones run a little longer before pinching, so the energy is pushed down the tree. This is the only time the ramification is built; miss it and the year is gone. Protect the silky new leaves from late frost with fleece on clear, still nights. Water daily as the surface dries.

Basis (reference): Harry Harrington, bonsai4me.com (beech: pinching the single spring flush, top harder than bottom); Peter Warren, Bonsai (DK)

May

Finish the pinching as the last shoots extend; by the end of the month the tree has set its buds for next year and will not regrow from cuts. Begin feeding when the leaves have hardened, with a balanced feed at half strength every fortnight; beech does not want forcing. Water every day the surface dries and give afternoon shade from now on. Look for woolly aphid on the undersides of leaves.

Basis (practice): General bonsai practice: feed after the leaves harden; RHS advice: woolly beech aphid

June

No cutting back: the beech has stopped and a cut now gives a dead stub, not a new shoot. Partial defoliation of the strongest upper shoots on a very vigorous tree is done by some growers to let light into the inner buds, but it is not a beginner's technique and does not produce a second flush. Water, shade, feed lightly, and leave the tree alone.

Basis (reference): Harry Harrington, bonsai4me.com (beech: a single flush, no summer cutting back); general practice

July

Water is the whole job: thin beech leaves scorch in a dry, hot spell and the tree wants morning sun, afternoon shade and shelter from wind. Water morning and evening in heat. Feed lightly. Check wire monthly; branches thicken slowly, but the bark marks easily.

Basis (rhs): RHS: Fagus sylvatica (sun scorch of foliage, shelter); general practice on summer watering

August

As July. Late in the month a nematode drench for vine weevil while the soil is warm. A strong tree may push a few late shoots, called Lammas growth; these can be pinched to two leaves as in April, or left if the tree is weak.

Basis (rhs): RHS advice: vine weevil (nematodes in late summer); general horticultural knowledge of Lammas growth on beech

September

Growth is long over; the tree is building next year's buds and storing for winter. Two low-nitrogen feeds and then stop. Water less as the nights cool. A good month to decide the winter's wiring and to look for any branch that has been shaded out and should be removed in February.

Basis (practice): General bonsai practice: low-nitrogen autumn feed for deciduous trees

October

Copper autumn colour, and the lower leaves will stay on the tree for the winter. Stop feeding. Clear any dropped leaves off the soil. Do not strip the retained leaves yet; they are left until late winter, and some growers believe they protect the buds. Light wiring of young shoots is possible now, but February is the better month for beech.

Basis (practice): General bonsai practice; the protective value of retained beech leaves is a grower's belief, not measured: estimate

November

Dormant. Water only when the soil is drying; make sure the pot drains, raised on feet. Start the frost routine: sheltered outside, and into a cold frame or unheated shed for hard, windy frosts, out again after. A beech that dries out while frozen loses its buds, so the shelter matters more for this species than for a maple.

Basis (rhs): RHS advice: overwintering container plants; RHS: Fagus sylvatica (dislikes waterlogging)

December

Cold, damp and sheltered. Check after frosts that the soil has drained and the pot has not heaved. The copper leaves rustling on a winter bench are one of the pleasures of the species; leave them. Plan February's wiring and order wire and a pot; beech pots are large and the good ones sell out.

Basis (practice): General bonsai practice for dormant native deciduous trees

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