



What to Look for When Buying Landscape Plants

Investing in quality plants is the first step in assuring long-term satisfaction when choosing trees or shrubs. Some of the following hints will help you to select the healthiest plants from your local nursery. And as with most things in life, quality tends to command a higher price. With plants, it's frequently worth it, since a well-grown tree or shrub will generally provide much better long-term satisfaction than a cheap one.

Look for trees with straight trunks and even branching up the main stem. Avoid trees that have two leaders (main stems) or those in which the leader has been destroyed. Trees with multiple or missing leaders tend to lose their directed upward growth.

Avoid trees with visible signs of damage such as broken branches, peeling bark, or discolored areas on branches and trunks. Vigorous trees will have buds forming for next year, and a fair amount of new twig growth should be evident from this year. Check the leaves to see if there is evidence of insects or diseases. Such signs are symptoms of stress and these plants are best avoided.

Many ornamental trees and most fruit trees consist of a top grafted onto a rootstock. There will be a slight line on the trunk just above ground level where the scion (top) meets the rootstock. If the graft shows signs of swelling there may be a problem. An incomplete or incompatible graft union can split apart at a future date.

Today, most landscape plants are grown in containers. Container-grown trees and shrubs are generally less than five years old. Their small size makes them easier to handle which is better for you and the grower. However, there are still things that you should check for.

Because of the rapid growth and finite soil volume inside containers, plants can easily become root-bound. If the roots fail to grow out of a circular pattern once you've installed them in your landscape, they may become stunted and die. Another problem is that of girdling roots. Girdling or circling roots wrap themselves around the main stem or other roots and can eventually "strangle" the plant. Neither of these problems is fully evident until the plant is removed from the container.

When feasible, pull containerized plants partially or fully out of the container and examine the root system before purchase. Soil mix particles should be visible between the roots. If they aren't the root ball is pot-bound.

It's also possible to encounter the opposite problem: not enough roots. A grower may sell the plant before its time, when it hasn't had a chance to become fully established in the container. Root loss due to environmental extremes (heat, cold, too much or too little moisture) on the container can also create poor root systems – or even kill plant roots in containers.

Again, whenever possible, check on the health of the lower half of the plant by gently pulling it up out of the pot. To do this grasp the main stem where it joins the soil and lift. Good roots are white to buff brown in color. Root tips are fleshy and fully turgid. Dark brown or black roots with a dull or sodden appearance indicate a plant in poor health.

Of course, some deciduous and broadleaf evergreen plants are still grown in field nurseries, and harvested either bare-root or balled and burlapped (B&B). Because these plants suffer tremendous root loss in harvesting, it's wise to purchase and replant them in spring and early summer so they have the entire growing season in which to get established. When selecting B&B stock, be sure the ball of soil is solid and well-tied. A broken, loosely-tied ball frequently suggests dried or broken roots – or both.

Once you've purchased your plants and taken them home, plant them carefully and prepare to enjoy their growth over the years to come. If it isn't possible to plant immediately, place plant in the shade on the north side of your house, and water them well. Then plant as soon as you can.

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