

## **SELECTING AND BUYING HEALTHY PLANTS**

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Spring planting fever is inspiring gardeners across the state to get out and beautify their yards with new plants, but many are unsure how to select them. Here are some guidelines for choosing healthy, good quality plants.

The first step before purchasing plants is to research which plants are suited to your planting site. Consider the following factors— How much sun does the area get throughout the day? Is the area exposed to wind? What is the soil type? Does it stay moist or is it usually dry? Does the area drain well? If you live on the coast, do you have salt spray or saline soil problems? Also keep in mind the ultimate size you want the plant to reach.

Determine which plant characteristics you find desirable or undesirable. Are you looking for a plant with a particular flower color or a long bloom season? How about attractive leaves or berries? Do you want to avoid plants that attract bees or have thorns? Keeping in mind that there are no perfect plants, which of these factors is most important to you?

When buying fruit trees or berry-producing ornamental plants, make sure you purchase more than one plant or variety if needed for the plants to produce fruit. Once you have determined your needs and priorities, you are ready to shop.

The next question is where to buy your plants. Many places sell plants. Garden centers, home improvement stores, nurseries, roadside stands, and mail order nurseries are a few of your choices.

If you are a novice gardener, a garden center or nursery with experienced staff may be more helpful than stores that specialize in something other than plants. Garden centers and nurseries often have a wider range of plants than the mass-market stores can maintain. The staff is usually better trained in keeping plants healthy once they have been unloaded from the supplier's truck. If you are looking for common plants and are familiar with the appearance of healthy plants, you may be able to find good prices at mass merchandisers and roadside stands. Avoid selecting plants on the basis of price alone.

Nurseries that grow their own plants are usually very knowledgeable about their specialties. Mail order nurseries can be a terrific source for rare and hard to find plants. If the same plant can be found locally, you will almost always get more plant for your money, and you can see exactly what you are getting.

Some other sources for less common plants are plant sales and swaps sponsored by botanical gardens, garden clubs or plant societies. Plant swaps can offer an interesting selection of locally adapted plants, and require nothing more in payment than plants to exchange. Be aware that plants frequently seen in swaps can be very vigorous, sometimes to the point of invasiveness.

The first step in selecting a place to shop is to ask gardeners you know where they like to buy plants. This is especially important when choosing mail order sources because you can not see the plants before buying them. The quality of photographs in a catalog may not correspond to the quality of the shipped plants.

The Clemson Extension Home & Garden Information Center website has several helpful links to help you find good plant sources. You can find these links at <http://hgic.clemson.edu/linksplants.htm>#Where to find plants.

Looks count when choosing a good nursery or garden store. The appearance of a garden center or nursery is often an indication of the care provided to the plants. Look for relatively weed-free, neatly laid out beds that do not include obviously dead or unhealthy plants with plants for sale.

Here are some other things to consider - Are plants well labeled? Does the nursery offer information on proper planting? Do they offer quality service and have a knowledgeable staff? Are the plants guaranteed?

When choosing plants, some general rules apply. First, look at the overall impression that the plant gives. Healthy plants will have good, rich color and a vigorous appearance compared to other plants of the same variety. Plants should be well-branched and shaped for their type and without physical damage such as stem scrapes or broken branches. Avoid plants that show signs of pests, diseases, drought injury or other problems.

Healthy roots are essential to healthy plants. Look at the roots of container grown plants by gently easing them out of their container. If you are uncomfortable or uncertain about how to do this, ask a nursery person to help. There should be plenty of healthy roots held firmly into the soil. On most plants, healthy roots will be light tan or white. A few plants will have bright yellow or red roots. There should be no offensive odor or mushiness. If roots are dark brown or black, look limp or feel soft, they are probably damaged or dead. Reject these plants. Also avoid plants whose roots are very tightly crowded and circling in containers (root-bound) or that have roots growing out the drain holes. These will not transplant well.

The soil ball of balled and burlapped (B&B) plants should remain firm, rounded and intact when handled. Avoid B&B root balls that appear "pancaked" or loose. Also avoid B&B plants that have a lot of roots growing outside the burlap. Those roots will probably be damaged or broken during transplanting.

When selecting trees and shrubs consider that smaller plants are easier to transplant and often become established and grow faster than initially larger plants. Look for plants in sizes that you can comfortably handle if you will be planting them yourself.

Look for trees and shrubs that are branched evenly on all sides. Plants with a lack of branching on one or two sides may have been grown in crowded conditions. Be aware, though, that branching may be minimal on very young trees. Look at the angle of the branches to the trunk. Wide angled branches will be stronger and less likely to break than narrow angled branches.

Watch out for synthetic burlap on balled and burlapped plants. This plastic fabric does not break down in the soil and must be removed completely during planting, which can be difficult on large plants.

If you are buying deciduous trees or shrubs while they are dormant, make sure the branches are flexible and springy. Dead branches will be brittle and are often withered. Buds along the branches should be plump and firm.

Be especially careful when buying trees to check that they are not root-bound. Root-bound trees often develop circling roots, which, left uncorrected, can eventually girdle or choke the tree.

When buying bedding plants, it may be tempting to buy the flat with the tallest plants and the most flowers, but this is not the flat to buy. Bedding plants that are more compact for their variety and are in bud rather than in flower will develop roots faster and suffer less transplant shock than their showy companions. If the only healthy plants available are already in bloom, pinch off the flowers before planting. Other things to look for are uniformity of plant size and healthy foliage color.

Once you have purchased your new plants, be sure to give them care that will ensure their continued good health. While transporting plants be sure to carry them by their container or root ball rather than by their trunks to avoid damaging their root systems. Wind exposure during transport home can dry and damage foliage. Cover or wrap plants that will be carried in a truck or other open vehicle.

When mail ordered plants arrive, unpack them immediately and check that they are in good condition. Water the plants thoroughly and put them in bright, indirect light. Since they have been in a dark shipping box for several days, they will need a bit of time to adjust before they can be put in full sun.

Plant your new purchases as soon as possible. If you can not plant right away, keep the plants in a protected area and check for moisture daily (or more often on bedding plants). Containers and balls will dry out much faster than ground soil does. Keep the plants shaded, since high temperatures and direct sun can kill roots.