

Selecting Trees

Proper plant selection is critical to success in the home landscape, and choosing the right plant for the right place is the key to this success. In the case of trees, proper selection is extremely important, given their ultimate size, magnitude, and permanence in our landscape. Before heading to the nursery, ask yourself the following questions:

What do I want to accomplish with this tree? For example, do I want privacy, fall color, shade, or something ornamental?

How much room do I have for a tree? What is the square footage on the ground that I can allot for this tree? Are there any restrictions on how high the tree can ultimately be? How close will it be to surrounding structures?

What are the site conditions where this tree will be planted? Is it wet or dry? Is it sunny or shady? Is it on a slope; will it get good drainage?

Are there any “special conditions” that the tree needs to meet? For example, do you want to avoid acorns, sweetgum balls, and prickly leaves in your children’s play area? Do you mind giving the tree some routine maintenance, or do you want something relatively care free?

Once you have narrowed your requirements, it is important that you find a reputable nursery with a staff knowledgeable about trees. They will be able to guide you in your choice of the tree that is best for you.

Types of Trees

Evergreen trees retain their leaves year round and are commonly used as buffers or privacy screens. Some may have single trunks, some may have multi-trunks, and some species may have either. Evergreen trees will either have needles or broad leaves.

Deciduous trees lose their leaves each fall and are usually chosen for providing shade or for their ornamental attributes. These trees either have a pronounced central trunk, such as a maple, or an open branch structure, such as a peach tree. Some deciduous trees, such as birches, are grown in multi-trunk form.



Evergreen and deciduous trees have a wide variety of uses; this Japanese cryptomeria is a year-round focal point in the landscape and this ginkgo is favored for its brilliant fall color.

Items to Examine

While at first glance a tree may appear healthy, a close inspection is important prior to purchase. Even small defect can create significant problems over time. Areas to inspect include the following:

Rootball: Trees are normally sold as bare root, container grown, or balled and burlapped.

Bareroot trees are normally sold in the dormant state. The roots are usually encased in moist organic material and wrapped in plastic. If the organic material is dried out, if the tree has sprouted leaves or green shoots, or if the roots are brown and crumbly or black and very soft, leave this tree at the store.



This kind of root structure will result in defects that will likely kill the plant.

The roots of container grown trees have a tendency to circle within the pot. Circling, or girdling, roots can eventually strangle a tree if left unaddressed at time of planting. Most nurseries will not object if you pull plants out of containers to look at the roots. The roots should be pale and fleshy, not brown or black. Although the roots may look tangled, assess whether you will be able to untangle them to some degree so that you will be able to insure 360 degree root distribution around the tree. Large girdling roots around the trunk may have to be removed.

Balled and burlapped trees have been dug from the field using a tree spade. The root ball is then wrapped in burlap and placed into a wire basket. While it is almost impossible to inspect the roots, there are things to look for. The rootball should be "tight". There should be no pockets of soil-filled burlap hanging outside the wire basket and the dirt should feel solid. Look at the top of the rootball. Avoid trees with girdling surface roots, and be sure that there is a "flare" at the bottom of the trunk where it meets the rootball. If the tree is leafed out look at the health of the canopy, as an unhealthy canopy can indicate unhealthy roots.

Avoid any plants that have been sitting on blacktop for an extended period of time. The heat from the blacktop can damage the roots, and it may be months before this damage becomes evident.



Trunk: The trunk should be reasonably straight and taper nicely at the bottom. There should be no cuts, wounds, or scrapes. Any places where branches were pruned from the trunk should have a healed "collar" surrounding the cut. Also look for swollen places, cracks, or any holes that can indicate insect damage. Additionally, the presence of moss or lichen along the trunk of a young tree can mean that the tree is not growing vigorously.

Scaffold and Canopy: Is there a strong, single central leader? If the top branch is "forked" this may not be a problem, but one of the forked branches will need to be cut back during the first pruning cycle. Is the tree symmetrical? The branches should be well distributed around the trunk at a wide angle where the branch attaches to the tree is much stronger than a narrow, v-shaped angle. Also avoid trees that appear to have been topped or "headed-back", whereby the branch ends have been cut back between the buds.

This tree has a strong central leader and excellent branch arrangement.

Leaves: While most homeowners prefer to buy and plant trees while they are dormant, trees can be planted year round if they receive adequate water. If the tree is leafed out, inspect these leaves for the presence of disease or insects. Additionally, the leaves should be of the appropriate size and color, and the canopy should look full.

Planting a tree is a long-term investment in your landscape, requiring careful and thoughtful selection. Additional information about tree selection can be obtained through the Arbor Day Foundation (www.arborday.org), the International Society of Arboriculture (www.isa-arbor.com), or through your local Cooperative Extension Office.

Submitted By:
Susan Russell