

Trees—buying them and their care

Four Tips for Selecting Trees at a Nursery

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Having worked in nurseries for 10 years including 6 years as a nursery manager, I have helped hundreds if not thousands of customers select trees. In my experience, most nursery customers do not know what to look for when selecting a tree to purchase. Most nursery customers who think they know what they are doing are still looking for the wrong things when they purchase a tree. The following are some tips for how to find the best trees to buy at a nursery.

The key to quickly establishing a new tree and getting vigorous growth the first year or two is to start with a vigorous, healthy tree. Very rarely do soil additives help enough to be able to make a poor tree grown into a healthy one. A healthy young tree has little need of root stimulator or soil additives.

1. Trees grow, branch patterns change

Do not assume the tree you see at the nursery is a miniature version of what it will be like as it grows. Most customers look at a young tree in the nursery and assume that the shape and branching pattern will be the same when the tree is grown, however, this is most often not the case.

Trees grow from the top up, and are not pushed up from the bottom. So, the branches you see on a young tree will not always be at the same height and the shape of the branches as the tree grows.

In fact, most branches you see on a young tree in the nursery will eventually be cut off because they are too low to the ground. In short, the branching pattern will change, it will not be the same as what you see in the nursery.

2. Consider the root system

One of the very most important parts of a tree that you are buying is the root system. A young tree may look very nice in a nursery, but if the root system has been damaged or if it is root bound in the container, it will not grow well and will establish very slowly.

For most trees in containers, it is easy to pop the container off and look at the root system. It will do no damage to the tree if the container is off for a minute or two while you check to see if the root system is suitable.

What you will want to see is a root system with as many small, fine roots and rootlets as possible and that it is not root bound. Root bound means several layers of roots circle around the container often making a dense, thick mat. It usually is not of major concern if there are just a few circling roots, this is not the same as being root bound.

3. Look for good growth on the young tree.

Trees in good condition should have plenty of new growth, either this seasons or last seasons growth depending on what time of year you are looking at the tree.

A lack of vigorous growth often means the tree is doing poorly, may have root damage or other problems. Such trees may well survive but may establish slowly and the chances of failure increase. Some tree species have less growth than others so you should compare trees against others of their kind and not against a different species.

4. Avoid trees with trunk wounds, broken major branches

Trees with scrapes or other abrasions on the trunk are more likely to develop serious problems on the main trunk, which can often lead to the development of disease at the location. Also, trees with discolored patches on the bark may have sunscald or a canker disease. If the wound is on a branch that can be pruned off, then it is not likely to turn into a major problem.