

Tips for Picking Good Plants



Root of the matter

Avoid plants with large roots extending from the bottom of the pot or cut at the water holes. Either ask nursery staff for help, or very carefully and gently squeeze the pot to see whether the roots are packed against the pot wall. Pick up the pot and give it a good sniff. A sour or unpleasant smell indicates decay.



Lovely hummingbird sage, roots fill the pot without being too crowded.

The significance of crowded roots varies depending on the degree of the problem and the type of plant. Plants with fibrous roots like grasses usually do fine. Plants with woody roots, however, can be seriously impacted. Trees are of particular concern because the damage to the plant may not be apparent for years. Circling or girdled roots are a common cause of tree failure. Inspect roots of trees carefully before planting. If circling is not too extreme, they can be pruned and gently straightened.

Undamaged stem

Check for stem damage and breakage, especially at the collar. For smaller pot sizes, up to 1-gallon, avoid overly woody stems since this can mean that the plant has been in its pot for too long.

The collar should be near or slightly above the soil level. When a plant is left in its pot too long, potting medium can wash out of the pot or decompose. The plant sinks down in the pot. Unscrupulous nursery workers may then “refurbish” the pot with a scoop of new soil. This is very bad! The buried collar is susceptible to disease, and the plant is growing in old, tired soil. It is not always easy to see whether the collar is buried. Either gently push the soil to expose surface roots, or ask the nursery staff to check around the collar for you to make sure it is at the correct height.

Clean, healthy leaves

Minor leaf damage is not a big concern. Browned tips or yellowing of leaves can indicate an accumulation of salts in the potting medium possibly from over-fertilizing, or some other disease or nutrient imbalance. Some native plants are deciduous, dropping their leaves seasonally or in response to drought, heat or frost, and may look unhealthy when in fact they are fine.



The coiled roots of this tree ultimately led to its demise.

The presence of lots of new young leaves and few older leaves can be an indication of an earlier problem. Plants can lose leaves due to drought stress, pests, or nutrient imbalance. If the problem is successfully treated, the plant leafs out again. The consequence of this common problem varies depending on what the plant is and how stressed it was, but be aware that somewhere along the line the plant may have been stressed.

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Not too big, not too small

Pick the plant that is neither over- nor under-sized for the pot. A pot containing a large plant may seem like a good deal but it can be in need for transplanting, its roots crowded, and the plant generally stressed and more prone to transplant shock.

A plant that is too small for its pot may have been potted up recently, meaning you are paying a higher price for the size of the pot rather than the plant. Sometimes plants are small for other reasons such as insufficient water, poor potting medium, crowding by faster growing neighbors, or genetic weakness.

It is not always easy to tell exactly what the correct plant size is for a given container. This is determined primarily by the roots which should loosely fill the pot. The stem and roots provide important information on plant age and health. Remember that native plants in nursery pots often look scrawny when compared with The Home Depot specials. This is subjective, but over time it becomes clearer.

Avoid problems

Check beneath leaves, around the leaf petioles (the leaf stem) and on the stems for common pests like aphids, mealy bugs, and scale. Slugs and snails may be lurking under mulch or dead leaves on the surface of the potting medium. Run your finger under the pot and in the drainage holes to check for these slimy pests. You can dislodge the snails and slugs and leave it at that, although some eggs may be left behind.

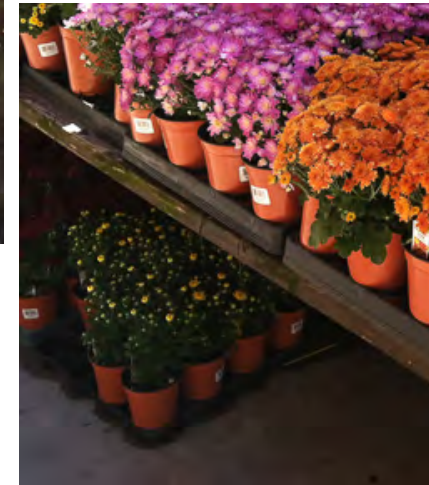


The woodiness of the stem indicates that this plant has probably been in its pot for too long.



In bud not bloom

Nurseries know that flowers sell plants. Be wiser, select the plants, often hidden under the table, that are in bud so that you, rather than those in the nursery, get to enjoy the full bloom period.



Buy the plants under the table so you can enjoy the full bloom period.

Buy young

The longer a plant resides in a nursery the more chance there is for plant stress. Most plants transplant best when young, exhibiting less transplant shock, often quickly catching up with older, larger plants. Furthermore, younger plants are easier to manage, and less expensive to start with.

Dormant, not dead

Some plants, such as western sycamore, western redbud, alders, and California buckeye, exhibit a period of dormancy, even in nursery containers. While entering into dormancy the leaves may curl or look generally unhealthy. Do not let senescent leaves or leafless branches scare you off; small buds on the branches indicate that it is alive - albeit sleeping.