

# Selecting Landscape or Indoor Plants

## *A Pictorial*

---

*Once you decide what plants you want to place in your landscape or inside your house, the next step is going to a nursery or garden center to purchase those plants. This pictorial guide will help you identify and avoid potential problems during plant selection. Overall, you will be looking for structurally balanced plants that appear healthy and vigorous with no stress symptoms, no obvious insect, disease, or mechanical damage, and no weeds.*



1. Select overall healthy-looking plants, and avoid overgrown and leggy ones.





2. Avoid stressed (and, of course, dead) plants. Sometimes it is tempting to purchase stressed plants on sale, but keep in mind that it might take more dollars and time to save those plants.



3. For ornamental grasses, dead basal leaves sometimes are good indicators of stress. Inspect the leaves of grasses as you would any other ornamental plants.



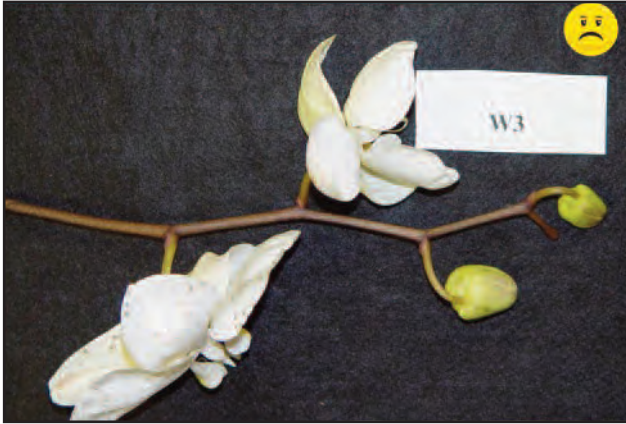
4. For plants with flowers, select those with less than one-third of the flowers in full bloom and plenty of flower buds. If you purchase plants that are already in full bloom, you won't get to enjoy those blooms as long.





5. Avoid plants with lots of spent flowers or seedheads because these are past their peak and will provide less time for you to appreciate their blooms.





6. Many insects are attracted to flowers, and some insects can damage the plants. Many plants are also susceptible to diseases. Avoid plants with visible indications of disease and insect problems.



7. Avoid plants with deformed flowers.





8. Select plants whose sizes are in proportion to their containers and avoid overgrown plants. Overgrown plants (either in terms of shoots or roots) have been restricted by the container size and are under stress.





9. For small plants in packs or containers, carefully pull the plant out of the cell pack or container and inspect the roots. Look for healthy white roots and avoid dark, blackish, watery roots or overgrown (circling) roots.





10. For plants in big containers, it is not as easy to pull the plant out to view the roots. Inspect the base of the trunk, looking for indications of current and potential root circling or girdling, and avoid purchasing such pot-bound plants.

11. Avoid plants with insect and disease symptoms. Most plants in garden centers or nurseries won't be as heavily infested as the plants shown here (mealy bugs and sooty mold), so look closely for any signs of insects or diseases.





12. Check the undersides of leaves, especially unusual-looking leaves, for "undercover" insects (scale insects and spider mites) feeding under the leaves.



13. Avoid plants with any sign of weeds in the pot or on the root ball. Introducing weeds into your landscape is nearly effortless, but it is extremely difficult to get rid of them.



14. Be familiar with the normal appearance of the plants you are interested in purchasing. Variegated leaves are extremely common in ornamental plants. Some green leaves have a fringe of white/gold around the edge of the leaf, some have irregular dots or streaks, and some are a color other than green. Understand that these variations are not “symptoms” of any concern.





15. In plants that do not normally have variegated leaves, general yellowing and discoloration in leaves indicates nutrient deficiency and should be avoided.







16. Novelty in leaf shape and size should be distinguished from leaf abnormality.



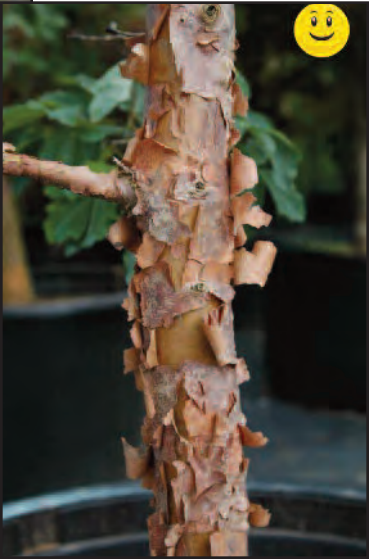


17. Novelty in stem shape should be distinguished from stem abnormality.





18. Look for trunks with normal bark patterns and avoid plants with splitting and sunken bark.





19. Avoid plants with leaf deformation (crinkling, stunting, curling), which could be the result of chemical (e.g., herbicide) injury. It is hard to tell when the plants will grow out of the injury.



20. All branches, including the small ones, should have leaves. A leafless shoot tip could be from cold or freeze damage. This might not be an issue with shrubs (plants with multi stems), but it could result in less than desirable tree form and two competing leaders in trees with opposite buds.



21. Suckers are very common in grafted plants. Avoid plants with extensive suckers at the base of the trunk, and prune suckers regularly when they appear in the landscape. Especially in grafted plants, the suckers can produce branches that are less desirable than the intended purchase.



22. Ease of propagation is a good and important trait in the ornamental plant industry, but it sometimes results in invasiveness. Learn about invasive plants and avoid helping them spread. The little plantlets on the leaf edge of this plant could drop and root in many conditions and become weedy.



23. Look for a well-balanced flowering structure and avoid imbalanced flowering plants, which could be caused by disease infection.





24. When selecting plants during the dormant season, it is easy to identify old pruning wounds. Avoid trees that were poorly pruned, resulting in water sprouts and a cavity that might accumulate moisture and encourage decay.



25. Ball and burlap (B&B) plants are normally root pruned during digging in the nursery and heeled in with bark, dirt, or other mulching materials to prevent excessive water loss. Select B&B plants that are not wilting and show no signs of insect, disease, or mechanical damage.



26. Many large deciduous and evergreen plants are available as B&B. Planting B&B is more common during the dormant and semi-dormant season when it is easier to view branch structure in deciduous plants.





27. Check the root ball of B&B plants to make sure it is intact.



28. Plants produced in fabric bags aboveground or partially belowground have the advantages of both field-grown and container plants. Like container plants, plants produced in fabric are less likely to have root damage that can occur when field-grown plants are dug. They are also less likely to be pot-bound, a danger with container-grown plants. Selection of types of bag-grown plants is similar to both field-grown and container plants.



29. Boxed plants are normally for very large specimens. Selection of boxed plants is similar to other container plants.



30. For bareroot plants, check the roots if possible and avoid moldy and watery, unhealthy roots.



*Copyright 2010 by Mississippi State University. All rights reserved. This publication may be copied and distributed without alteration for nonprofit educational purposes provided that credit is given to the Mississippi State University Extension Service.*

By **Dr. Mengmeng Gu**, Assistant Extension Professor, Plant and Soil Sciences; **Clarissa Balbalian**, Diagnostic Lab Manager, Entomology and Plant Pathology; and **Brian Templeton**, Extension Associate II, Landscape Architecture.

Discrimination based upon race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status is a violation of federal and state law and MSU policy and will not be tolerated. Discrimination based upon sexual orientation or group affiliation is a violation of MSU policy and will not be tolerated.

**Publication 2640**

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. JOE E. STREET, Interim Director

(POD-12-10)