

How to choose healthy plants

By Bobbi Gustafson

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When choosing potted plants, look closely.

Whether you garden to please the eye or put food on the table, you can get the most for your gardening dollars by making wise choices when buying potted plants.

First, know what the plant is supposed to look like. Plant tops should have good color. Leaves should be clear, tender, clean, shiny (if meant to be) and well formed. Stay away from shriveled, yellow or spotted, or malformed plants.

If flowering, a plant in bud is preferable to one in bloom, because a budding plant will transplant with less stress. Some growers force plants to bloom before they have enough vegetative growth, thinking they'll sell better that way. But as long as these plants remain in bloom, they will not achieve the fullness you want. Either pass on these or remove the flowers and buds, then feed the plant a high-nitrogen food until it fills out. Next, switch to a phosphorous- and potassium-rich food to encourage blooms.

The centers of your plants should branch nicely and be well formed and not lopsided. Check for scarring or damage on the branches, which could invite disease. If the plant is tall and spindly, it's been trying too hard to get enough light. "Leggy" plants like this are not desirable.

Second, inspect the plant carefully for signs of bugs, slugs or disease. Look on both sides of the leaves. Perennial bulbs should be checked for rotting. If you choose a plant with bugs, disease or rot, you are bringing it home to your garden or house. Don't confuse a diseased perennial with one that simply is nearing its dormancy phase. You could probably bring the latter home and plant it to enjoy next season.

Check the soil for signs of mold and bugs. Slugs sometimes hide in the bottoms of pots after crawling in through the drainage holes, or they may hide in flats of seedlings. If the top of the soil is weedy or you find excess salts on the surface, the plant may not have been well cared for. If you see liverwort on the soil surface, put the plant down and walk away—unless you want liverwort taking over portions of your yard in the future.

Third, examine the roots by carefully sliding the plant out of its pot. (If you do not know



Liverwort, such as this variety in a Skagit County garden, spreads rapidly and is highly undesirable. If you see it on the surface of a potted plant's soil, pick another plant. Photo by Jason Miller.

how to do this without damaging the plant, ask for help from a representative of the business where you are shopping. They'll appreciate your courtesy.) The roots should be white or tan, and should not look like they are rotting.

The roots also should fill the pot, but not grow thickly out of the bottom or wrap around other roots. Plants with this condition are called "root-bound." If you find a healthy plant that you simply must have, and it is root-bound, you can cut the roots and tease them out before planting it.

If the soil around the roots is loose and crumbling, the plant has not reached its prime in that pot. This usually indicates that the plant was recently potted, or transferred to a larger pot to increase its value (the larger the pot, the higher the price). This is not desirable; the plant should have been in the pot long enough so that when you remove the plant gently, the soil comes with it.

When choosing shrubs and trees, make sure to check for wrapping roots; that is, roots that have wrapped themselves around the root ball several times. If this happens, the plant can strangle itself in a few years, especially if the root ball has been wrapped with burlap, which prevents all hope of the roots finding a less harmful growing path. If you buy a shrub or tree that's been burlapped and tied, cut off all the twine (which can cut through or grow into the bark) and remove the burlap before planting it.

Check for over-fertilization of the tree or shrub you're considering. It's common to see little balls of time-release fertilizer throughout the potting soil, which is not necessarily a good thing: Too much of it near the base will discourage feeder roots from developing. After a couple of years, the plant may struggle or even die, because plants need to "search" a little for food; this builds their root systems.

If you find this has happened and you cannot return the tree or shrub, shake the soil out of the roots, rinse them in a bucket of water, then repot the plant in potting soil with no fertilizer and give it a chance to develop strong roots.



Choose plants with healthy roots, which should be white or tan, and should not look like they are rotting. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.



Steve Thompson, owner Thompson's Greenhouse in Mount Vernon, stands in one of the nursery's greenhouses with plant baskets that are just starting to bloom. Buying plants in bud stage, like these, lets you enjoy the blooms for a longer period. If you buy individual plants while they're budding rather than flowering, they'll transplant with less stress. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.

Last, look for signs of stress brought on by humans. For example, if a plant has been overwatered or underwatered for too long, it might not recover. Then again, with the right touch and a little patience, you might be able to nurse it back to health and enjoy it for years.

Plant-picking at the Plant Fair

Try out your plant-picking smarts at the annual Master Gardener Plant Fair, sponsored by the Skagit County Master Gardener Foundation. Beginning this year, the Plant Fair moves to a new location, and promises to be bigger and better than ever!

What: Skagit County Master Gardener Plant Fair
Where: Skagit County Fairgrounds, Building F
When: Saturday, May 9, 8 a.m. till 3 p.m.

Come choose from more than 2,500 tomatoes (25+ varieties), plus vegetable starts, peppers, herbs, annuals, perennials and more. Demonstrations, garden art and food vendors, and education displays also are planned. Don't miss it!