

# How to Choose Healthy Plants

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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 dollar 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, 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 will 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 has been trying too hard to get enough light. “Leggy” plants like this are not ideal.

Next, 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 is simply 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 (one of the most difficult-to-control weeds in nursery production that thrives in low light, high humidity, high nutrition and moist substrates ) taking over your yard.

Examine the roots by carefully sliding the plant out of its pot. (If you do not know how to do this without damaging the plant, ask for help from the business where you are shopping. They will appreciate your courtesy.) The roots should be white or tan, and should not look like they are rotting. The roots should fill the pot, but not grow thickly out of the bottom or wrap around other roots. Plants like this are called “root-bound.” If you find a healthy plant that is root-bound, and you simply must have it, you can cut the roots and tease them out before planting it.



**LEFT:** Several buds are ready to bloom on this zonal geranium, which can be transplanted at this stage with less stress than a plant in full bloom. **MIDDLE:** Cut the roots of this plant and gently spread them when planting to ensure healthy growth. Examine the roots too: they should be a healthy tan or white. **RIGHT:** The center of this osteospermum branches nicely and should maintain a good symmetrical growth. Clear, shiny and well-formed leaves indicate a healthy plant. *Photos by Lynn Heagney/WSU Skagit County Extension.*

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 into the bark) and remove the burlap before planting.

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 to the nursery or retailer, shake the soil out of the roots and rinse the roots in a bucket of water. Repot the plant in potting soil with no fertilizer to give it a chance to develop strong roots.

Lastly, look for signs of stress brought on by humans. For example, if a plant has been over watered or under watered for too long, it might not recover. Then again if you are willing to take a chance, with the right touch and a little patience, you might be able to nurse it back to health and enjoy it for years to come.