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The Myth of Indisputable Information

“Nursery brochures are always the best sources of appropriate planting practices”

The Myth

As a service to their clientele, retail nurseries often provide educational brochures describing various aspects of landscape plant selection and management. The most potentially useful of these are the instructions for proper installation and maintenance of new plant material. When written lucidly and illustrated carefully, these brochures can maximize plant survival, customer satisfaction, and nursery profits. Furthermore, it creates a bond of trust between the nursery and its customers. If employees are also reading these materials, even the least experienced staff member should be able to answer questions in a knowledgeable manner.

The Reality

Most nursery customers assume that nurseries have adequate staffing and time to read up on the latest horticultural research. This simply is not possible given the demands of running a business with the addition of sudden oak death and other serious nursery problems. Thus, while planting brochures are indisputably a valuable resource, they end up causing more harm than good when they are not updated on a regular basis. Like any other branch of science, horticulture is a dynamic field where experimental science continuously shapes the practical application. To be considered “best management practices”, such practices must be frequently reviewed and revised.

I recently received a planting brochure copyrighted in 1987 that is still being distributed by an out-of-state retail nursery. As a more interactive version of my column this month, I invite you to test your knowledge of best management practices by evaluating the statements from this brochure excerpted below:

- “Dig a hole twice as wide and twice as deep as the plant’s root ball.”
- “Mix excavated soil with sand, peat moss, rotted manure or other soil amendments. Note: If your soil is heavy and full of clay, add sand to aid excess water drainage.”
- “Gently tap the sides of the container and slip the plant out, being very careful to keep the root ball intact.”
- “It’s best to water plants in the morning, especially on clear, hot days. If the leaves are allowed to heat up on a hot day and are then splashed with cold water, the plant is shocked and the leaves may shrivel up or spot.”

Bonus point: What other fact should alert you to question the validity of this information?

These practices has been discussed in this column before; the column archives are stored at http://www.puyallup.wsu.edu/~Linda%20Chalker-Scott/Horticultural%20Myths_files/index.html.

Briefly, here are the most currently accepted methods

- *The hole should be at least twice as wide, but no deeper than the root mass* (The myth of instant landscaping – August 2001)
- *Amending native soil prior to installing permanent landscapes (i.e. woody plant material) is not a sustainable practice; instead, topdress with organic mulch.* (The myth of soil amendments –

August 2000; The myth of soil amendments part 2 – November 2000; The myth of soil amendments part 3 – March 2003)

- *Container plants should be bare-rooted at installation to remove potting media and to correct root problems* (The myth of fragile roots – January 2003)
- *Wet foliage is not susceptible to sunburn; although it is best to irrigate in the morning, plants should be watered any time they exhibit drought stress.* (The myth of hot weather watering – August 2002)

Bonus point: Any planting instructions that were written in 1987 are no longer valid. The science behind the practices has advanced our knowledge and educational materials should reflect this.

It is encouraging that more retail nurseries are providing educational materials to their clients. Dated information, whether given orally or writing, defeats this educational opportunity. Extension faculty and staff recognize the time and money constraints on businesses and are willing educational partners. Leaders in the nursery and landscape industry should request the most current information on plant selection and management to share with their customers, their colleagues, and their employees. It's information that is readily available from university extension faculty. (I've developed a set of installation and management instructions for woody plant materials and have included them in this month's B&B.)

The Bottom Line

- Best management practices are constantly changing as a result of ongoing scientific research
- Most nurseries do not have resources to research and write educational materials
- Educational materials for both customers and employees need to be updated annually to ensure validity
- Information on best management practices is readily available from WSU and other land-grant university extension offices

For more information, please visit Dr. Chalker-Scott's web page at <http://www.theinformedgardener.com>.