

Planting Trees in Your Yard – Selecting the Best Trees from the Nursery

Not only do we need to plan ahead and choose the right tree for the spot in our yard but we need to choose the best tree from the nursery. Not all trees in the nursery are created equal.

Trees go through many stages at the grower before they are on display to be sold at the nursery. During successive stages they are planted and replanted, pruned and re-pruned. Sometimes extra soil gets piled up over the top of the roots which results in the root system being too deep in the soil. This often leads to a poorly developed root system that is undersized. When small twig like trees are pruned by the grower, growing defects, branch spacing problems and branch union defects are sometimes overlooked, and this leads to poorly structured trees that will be prone to breakage in later years.

It can be very difficult for the person purchasing a tree to know if they are buying a tree with a good, strong root system or an underdeveloped root system that is weak. Even though the tree trunk and branches are visible, if the person purchasing the tree doesn't recognize and understand good and poor structural traits they may end up purchasing a tree with built in future problems and failures.

Here are some steps to take and problems to avoid when picking out a tree at the nursery:

- If you are choosing a tree to grow large, (not a bush that will stay small) then choose one with a single trunk. Do not choose multi-stemmed trees. Sometimes multi-stems start at soil level sometimes they develop higher up on the trunk where several stems will develop at the same spot, (fruit trees are often allowed to develop this way). This is weak structure that will have future problems.
- Choose trees with a central leader (stem) from the soil to the top of the tree. If the stem of the tree splits into a second stem (leader) that is approximately the same size, it is called a co-dominate leader and is usually a weak attachment point that is prone to splitting apart and breaking in future years under snow load or wind.
- Choose trees with good trunk development and some small lower branches. If the tree stem is very skinny and long with very few lower branches keep walking and leave that tree at the nursery. Lower branches on a tree are temporary (so they should be small) but they are necessary for proper trunk taper and development.
- Do not choose trees with damage to the trunk of the tree. It may be obvious damage such as bark scraped away or it may require very close examination to recognize the problem. Look for sunken or discolored areas on the trunk bark. If you find them either walk away from the tree or determine that it is not trunk damage. Sun scalding on the trunk of a tree is very serious damage that may

only show up in the nursery as a slight discoloration of the bark. However, underneath the bark is dead trunk wood.

- Do not choose trees with broken root balls. Carefully and gently test to see if the trunk of the tree moves (is loose) inside the dirt in the pot or root ball. If it easily moves around in the dirt walk away. If when you gently push on the tree trunk the pot or root ball solidly stays with the trunk go ahead and inspect further.
- If the root ball is determined to be solid you need to find where the first significant root (not hair roots but pencil or finger size root) is located. If burlap or plastic is covering the top of the root ball it must be opened up to expose the top of the root ball. Do not remove rapping from the sides of the root ball you do not need to expose the sides and this could weaken the root ball. You should gently probe or remove the top layer of dirt to find the first significant root. This root should be at the soil surface of the root ball or about one inch below the soil. If the first significant root is more than two inches below the original top of the root ball walk away from the tree.
- Look at the general health of the tree and see if you notice any major dead or unhealthy branch areas, also be sure the top of the tree is living. These could be future major problems.

There are some additional detailed criteria to possibly consider when looking for the perfect tree, but if you follow these essential guidelines you should find a good tree to purchase. For professional help choosing a tree call a Consulting Arborist.

Next month I will discuss the proper way to plant your tree to give it the best opportunity to survive, develop and turn your investment into an asset to your property.