HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

PURCHASING HEALTHY PLANTS

Looking for that perfect gift for someone special? Plants can offer a great solution to this dilemma. A healthy, vigorous plant will provide enjoyment to any home or landscape. They are available in a variety of sizes, shapes, colors, and prices. There's a plant to fit your needs and your budget, whether you want to buy a small houseplant or a large tree for the landscape. But, before you rush out to buy that perfect gift, you should know how to choose the perfect plant.

When purchasing plants you want to buy the best quality plant for your money. Therefore you need to be able to identify what a quality, healthy plant looks like. It can sometimes be difficult to tell which ones have the best chance for a long life. Healthier, pest-free plants may cost more money, however, that is not always the case. Less expensive plants can offer the same survival advantages as the expensive plants, if you are careful to choose the right ones and know what to look for.

Be aware of the "bargain" or "50% off" plants. They are usually on sale for a reason, whether it be the end of their growing season or that they are sick plants. If you have the time and resources to care for these plants until they recover, then they can be a good deal. But if you don't, leave them for someone who does.

Look for plants that have a compact growth habit and an abundance of foliage. Spindly and leggy plants with few leaves are most likely victims of disease and insect problems. These problems will also cause the leaves to fall. Leaves should be uniform in color, without brown or yellow discoloration on the tips. Make sure that trunks and branches are well formed and without scars or cracks.

Pest problems are a nuisance to you and your plants, so carefully inspect the plants for signs of insects or diseases. No problems now are fewer problems for you in the future. Speckling on the leaves indicate spider mite damage, curling of leaves are caused by aphids, and small bumps on the stems or underside of the leaves are signs of scale. Yellow or brown leaves, rotting stems, and brown, soft roots indicate disease problems. Be sure that the soil in the container has a good color and is not heavily compacted. Roots of the plant should not be growing out the bottom of the pot.

Another consideration before purchasing a plant, is where the plant will eventually be placed. If indoors, determine if it needs any special lighting conditions in order to thrive. If outdoors, make sure it is adaptable to the landscape and climate conditions. Also, be aware of the mature size of the plant. A small, petite tree now may grow up to be fifty feet tall!

Still unsure about a plant for a gift or what type of plant to buy? What about a citrus tree? Potted citrus trees are popular gifts for the holidays. They provide lovely holiday decoration and additional pleasure for many years to come.

When choosing a citrus tree, look for the same signs as stated for a healthy plant and avoid the ones that show insect and disease problems. Choose a bushy tree with uniform green leaves and shun those with pale or gray foliage that are losing a large number of leaves.

Whatever plant you choose, add an informative publication to your gift. The Osceola County Extension Service can provide you "how to care for" information and publications on a wide variety of plants and horticultural issues. These publications are written and produced by specialists at the University of Florida and are free of charge. Gardening books are also available for purchase and make great gifts. To inquire or receive information, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls and visits Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm. Call (321) 697-3000.