HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

A PLANT FOR MOTHER'S DAY

Mother's Day is only a week away. Have you bought your mother a gift yet? How about a plant? A healthy, vigorous plant can provide enjoyment to any home or landscape. They are available in a variety of sizes, shapes, colors and prices.

One should fit your needs and budget, whether you want to buy mom a small houseplant for her kitchen table or a large tree for the landscape to replace one that blew down in the hurricanes. However, before you rush out to buy that perfect gift, you should know what to look for and what to avoid.

The most important step in purchasing a plant is to be able to identify what a high quality plant looks like. It may be difficult to tell which ones have the best chance for survival. Healthier, pest-free plants usually cost more, but that is not always the case. Less expensive plants can offer the same chance for survival as the expensive plants if you choose the right ones.

Look for those 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 and decrease the chance of long-term survival. 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. Speckling on leaves indicates spider mite damage, curling of leaves is caused by aphids, and small bumps on the stems or underside of the leaves are signs of scale. Yellow or brown leaves, rotten stems, and brown, soft roots indicate disease. Be sure that the soil in the container has a good color and is not heavily compacted. Roots should not be growing out from the bottom of the pot.

Another consideration is where the plant will be placed. If indoors, determine if it needs special lighting to thrive. If outdoors, make sure it is adaptable to the landscape and climate. Be aware of how big the plant will grow. A petite tree may grow to 50 feet later.

What about a citrus tree? Potted citrus trees make popular gifts. Not only are they beautiful plants, they are gifts that keep on giving year after year.

When choosing a citrus tree, look for the same signs as mentioned above. Also 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.

Whichever plant you choose, add an informative publication to your gift. The Osceola County Extension Service can provide information and publications on a wide variety of plants and horticultural issues. The publications are written and produced by specialists at the University of Florida and are free. To inquire, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls and visits, Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at (321) 697-3000.

Interested in insects?

Mark Deyrup, senior research biologist of the Archbold Biological Station, will talk about insects and their relationship with native plants at the Florida Native Plant Society meeting at 7 p.m. Tuesday.

The group meets on the first Tuesday of the month at Harry P. Leu Gardens, 1920 N. Forest Ave., Orlando. For
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