

## Selecting the Right Plant for the Right Place

Jennifer Pelham, Urban Horticulture Extension Agent  
University of Florida/IFAS Extension in Osceola County

We are all guilty of it – purchasing a beautiful landscape plant on a whim without having any idea where to plant it in the yard. It's called impulse buying and, unfortunately, impulse buying of plants is not always the best for your landscape or for the plant. Selecting the right plant for the right place may sound like a daunting task, but with a little research, it can save you a lot of trouble in the future.

Plants have specific needs whether it is light, water, soil or space. Your landscape has specific characteristics. It is important to match the needs of the plants with what your landscape has to offer. Planting the right plant in the right place can prevent many common health problems, like insects and diseases. Unhealthy plants are more prone to these pest attacks. Selecting the right plant can also reduce maintenance requirements, such as pruning. Plants selection should be based on functionality, aesthetics, and environmental conditions.

Functionality is what you want the plant to do for you. Do you want it to provide shade? Create a barrier or fence? Be a focal point in the landscape? Cover bare ground? There are many things that plants can do for us in our landscape and there are many plants that will fill our needs. However, we also want the plants to be aesthetically pleasing. We want them to look nice in our landscape. Aesthetics is subjective. What may look good to you may not look good to everyone else. Use your best judgment to what colors, forms, and arrangements you want in your landscape.

The maximum size of the plant should be considered when selecting a site in the landscape. A small, petite plant now may grow to be a large shrub in a few years. Make sure to research the mature size of the plant and allow it enough room to grow. This will save a lot of pruning in your future and it will be healthier for the plant when they have optimum space. Also, when planting multiple plants in a row, leave the recommended planting space between them. Shrubs and trees are permanent plants in our landscape; they need that space to grow properly and will fill in the empty space as they do.

Although space is important, matching the environmental needs of the plant with the environmental conditions you have in your landscape is even more important. First consider the hardiness zones. Osceola County is in hardiness zone 9b. This is a tricky location. We may be a little too warm for plants that only grow to zone 9 and we may be a little too cold for plants that grow to zone 10.

Research the light and water requirements of the plants. Some plants prefer full sun, some like shade, and some like partial shade. Full sun is defined as an area that receives direct sunlight for 6-8 hours a day; partial sun is defined as an area that receives 4-6 hours of sun a day; and shade is under 4 hours of sun a day. When planted without the adequate amount of sun or shade, the plants will struggle. Plants that do not receive enough light often are weak and become "leggy."

Plants that receive too much sun than they desire may sunburn or scald. Study the sun patterns in your landscape, so you know how much sun you have to offer then plants.

Water is the key to plants survival. Just like sun, some plants require more water than others. For example, I see many red maple trees planted in dry landscapes. Red maples like water and will struggle when they do not receive enough. Also, do not assume that all Florida native plants are drought tolerant. There are native plants that grow in marshes and swamps. Make sure to research the water requirements of your plants before purchasing them. However, even drought tolerant plants need an adequate amount of water when you first planted.

By planting the right plant in the right place, your plants will be healthier, have less insect and disease problems, and will require less maintenance. For more information on plant selection or answers to other gardening and landscaping questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm. You may also email me at [jwel2@osceola.org](mailto:jwel2@osceola.org).