

# Choosing Good Plants

Now that you have good soil in your garden it is up to you to get the best plant possible. The best plant may not be the most convenient, or the easiest. Here's my list in descending order:

**Seed** • Best because it is natural. Seed-grown plants always have the best roots, the best branching structure and ultimately the quickest growth, however not everything is easy to grow from seed and many desired plants are hybrids or selections that are not reliably obtained in seed form. Also most homeowners and homeowner associations want larger plants installed.

**Bulb** • Excellent but only a fraction of plants are obtained as a bulb.

**Balled & Burlapped** = Excellent. This is the best way to get a desirable woody shrub or tree. These plants are grown in the ground for several years. When sold they are dug up with burlap holding the roots and soil together. The transplanted plants perform as if they had grown on site all of their life. Unfortunately less than 10% of landscape plants are grown this way today.

**Bare Root** • Excellent. Quite a few ornamental trees and bushes and fruit trees and vine are planted as Bare Root. Similar to Balled & Burlapped but the soil is removed and many small roots are lost. Not suitable for large specimens (due to current harvesting techniques) but excellent results with smaller (1-3 year old) specimens of many plants. However, nearly all are deciduous plants (a few conifers and misc.) and only available for 3-4 months of the year.

**Container** • Good to Poor. The soil in containers is not only has a vastly different texture than your garden soil, it also usually contains a significant amount of compost. Younger plants in smaller containers are preferable. The soil on 1-gallon up to 5-gallon can be changed. (See Repairing Plants) It is difficult to detect a root crown defect (sharply circling roots) caused by confinement in containers. It may be difficult to determine what type of wood or bark product was incorporated

by the grower. (Decay resistant materials give better results.) Different growers use much different soil mixes and get varying results. The specimen with the largest leaves usually is the healthiest at that moment.

For a little more than a decade, Laguna Hills Nursery has grown plants in containers utilizing a soil (substrate) that contains no wood or bark products. Generally our plants grow faster, with larger leaves and better foliage color. The most important factor, however, is long-term performance. Our container substrate is 70%+ inert materials. Peat moss (0-30%) is the only organic matter we use but we do not depend upon its permanency to create volume or aeration. Because our substrate doesn't shrink significantly, our taller plants and trees won't lean.

Of all of the wholesale nurseries that we have done business with, the following provide plants that have performed well over a longer period of time. All of these grow plants in soil that contains wood compost, however, they differ from other growers in that the wood is redwood, the slowest decomposing wood. Suncrest Nurseries, Otto & Sons Nursery, Pacific Nursery. Although I prefer no wood compost at all, redwood seems to be the least bad.

There are a number of bedding plant growers that do not use wood or bark products in their soils. The best growers use peat moss with perlite. These include DoRight's, Golden, Dynasty. Because of their smaller size, bedding plants from bad growers are easier to repair. (see Repairing Plants)

# Repairing Plants

Although it is a better strategy to find a perfect plant, sometimes what you desire is only grown in undesirable (non-permanent) soil. You can purge a container-grown plant that is growing in improper soil. This involves removing all, or at least 50%, of the grower's potting medium and replacing it with a more permanent, more natural soil. Before starting you may need to have a location that will provide shade while rehabilitating the plant.

The danger faced with purging a leafy plant is that the roots are always damaged and water uptake is compromised for up to 1-2 weeks following the procedure. Leaves use (lose) water; the rest of the plant (stems and woody structures) loses relatively little. During the time it takes for the roots to regenerate, the leafy plant can totally dehydrate to death, especially if exposed to hot, dry conditions. If the purged plant is placed in a shady, humid location (under a bush or low tree) its water needs will be lessened. Removal of a significant amount of foliage or cutting back foliated stems will also lessen the water usage.

Deciduous plants are easy to purge without stressing in the winter during dormancy. They can also be done in summer if at least 90% of the foliage is removed. (The leaves will regrow before fall.)

Tropical plants are best purged in summer. Be sure to remove at least 90% of the leaves before starting if no shade is available. Houseplants are simply left indoors away from direct sun.

There are several techniques used to purge the roots of the wrong soil mix:

1. Attach a spray nozzle to your garden hose. A strong jet with relatively low water volume is quite efficient.
2. Use a sharp tool, such as a small size screwdriver, a sharpened chopstick or an ice pick, to loosen the soil around the roots and pick out large chunks of wood or bark. Often poking and prying the root ball from the bottom will result in a lot of material quickly falling away from the roots. It is important to take your time and preserve as much of the

delicate root system as possible.

3. Combine both methods. I usually probe with a stick first and finish with water.

Once the roots are clean make certain they remain wet until replanted. You may be surprised at how some plants can survive with just a few healthy roots.

If you wish to retain more foliage the plants should be repotted into better soil and placed in the shade for a minimum of 2 weeks until the roots have recovered.

If there are few or no leaves the plant can be installed in its final location immediately. Set the plant in a hole at the proper depth. Carefully surround the roots with pulverized native soil (try to keep the roots close to the surface). Try to maintain some separation between the roots. Water repeatedly (minimum of 3 times) until it can be certain that the roots and surrounding soil are wet. Make certain the plant doesn't lean as the soil settles.

You may wish to supply a mild fertilizer at the same time. During the growing season expect plants to initiate new growth within 2 weeks of when the soil was purged.

When plants are put into better soil you will notice that the new leaves are larger and greener and that the plants suffer less from stress. When I have changed the soil on Bougainvilleas going dormant for the winter they awaken and become evergreen plants (like they should be) and bloom throughout the year. The Gardenias we have purged also begin to bloom all year!