

Key to Gardening Success: Planting the Right Plant in the Right Place

By Joyce Bringhurst, Alameda County Master Gardener

Did you ever see a beautiful plant in a nursery and just had to have it? You bring it home, plant it, and either watch it slowly die off or see it flourish into a monster overtaking your entire garden?

Chances are most of us are guilty of impulse buying to some degree. We often buy plants because we are attracted to the way they look at the time, without taking into consideration whether it is the right plant for our soil type, light and watering condition, and whether it will complement the overall landscape design and surrounding architectural elements when it is full grown.

Next time you see a plant you like, take the time to write down the botanical name and variety and do some research so that you can decide whether it is the right plant for your garden, and if so, where best in your garden to plant it.

Most people know that the San Francisco Bay Area has many microclimates. Few realize that there can be many microclimates within a garden and on different sides of a house, tree, fence, or rock. Trees and walls can provide shade, while areas near a rain gutter or drain pipe can supply additional moisture. A south-facing wall can provide radiant heat at night to prevent frost sensitive plants such as citrus and bougainvilleas from freezing. The beauty of choosing the right plant for the right location is that once it is established, it requires little or no maintenance.



Another critical element to success is to select the best time to plant. Along the coastal regions, planting can be done almost all year long. But in the inland valleys avoid summer planting because the intense heat can stress the plant, causing it to wilt and die.

The best time of the year to plant in the entire Bay Area is fall. During the cooler months broadleaf plants slow down or stop growing, while deciduous plants lose their leaves. When growth slows or stops above ground, nutrients are transported down to the root zones. The cooler temperatures and rains enable the roots of new plants to have ample time to grow and develop before leafing out in the spring. During the summer, the plant's healthy root system will allow it to absorb more nutrients and moisture to sustain healthy growth above the

soil as well as compensate for water loss during the hot months.

Fall is also the only time of year when bare root plants are available. Although most bare root plants sold in nurseries are packaged, there are some local nurseries that place their bare root plants in raised beds mulched with moist saw dust and compost. Buying plants from those nurseries will allow you to examine the overall health, form, and structure of the plant. If you like what you see, you can gently ease the plant out of the raised bed to examine the roots. If the roots look healthy, moist, and symmetrical, with little or no broken bark, it will be a good plant to buy. The bare root plant will need to be placed in a plastic bag with moist saw dust immediately, so that the roots won't dry out. It should then be planted as soon as possible.

When purchasing potted plants, it is best to pick the 1-5 gallon sizes. Besides being cheaper, a small plant can often adapt to the new planting site much faster and easier. Another plus is that it is much easier to dig a small hole than a big one!

The Horticulture Department of Merritt College in Oakland has done studies to measure the growth rate of small to large potted plants all planted at the same time. They found that after a few years, the various size plants had all grown to about the same overall size.

Choosing the right plant for the right spot in the garden is only one element of success. In a future article, how to plant and nurture your plants will be discussed.

Further information on plant selection and answers to gardening problems may be found at the Alameda County Master Gardener website (www.acmg.ucdavis.edu) or **call the hot lines at (510) 639-1371 or (925) 960-9420.**