What to Know When You Purchase Plants?

By Linda Reddick, Kingman Area Master Gardener

This is a real question, and my answer may create some controversy. But I felt impelled to write this article based on my personal experiences. Landscaping and propagation of plants and trees takes time and money, and a waste of either is not an option for me. Having the answers to the following questions before you make your next purchase will be beneficial to you.

Know your planting zone, both cold tolerant USDA (US Department of Agriculture) zones and heat tolerant AHS (American Horticulture Society) zones, and determine if you are located in a micro climate.

Know your soil type; sandy, sandy loom, clay etc. Depending on the type of plant you are considering, soil amendments may be needed.

What is the purpose of the plant; fruit, shade, color texture, or ornamental?

Will this plant or plants be exposed to east/west sun, high winds, or reflective heat?
If it’s a large shrub or tree, what is the maximum height and width your space will accommodate? Do you want evergreen or deciduous?

When you visit a nursery or the lawn and garden department are they familiar with the local vegetation? Do they carry plants that are adaptable to our environment? Unfortunately some garden departments receive shipments of plants that are not suitable for our arid dry climate. These plants are shipped in mass quantities from nurseries in other states. In many cases they were grown in climate controlled environments, or in most cases totally different climate zones. Yes, they look great at the store because they have only been there a short time, but what will they look like in a couple of weeks or months? I do not by any means intend to put down any of the local lawn and garden departments. They can only sell what they are shipped, and a retail clerk can not be expected to know everything about all the plants. My point is; just because a local store carries it, does not mean it will thrive here, or even grow.

If you do find a plant at one of the local centers, scrutinize it carefully.

- Does the plant container identify the proper climate zone? Water and sunlight needs?
- Are there insects on the plant? Check both the top of and the underside of the leaves. Scratch the soil to see if insects are present.
- Is it root bound, are the roots growing out of the bottom of the container?
- Do the leaves appear healthy, and uniform on the plant? Are they the proper color?
- Does the plant appear lanky or spindly?
• Are there dead stems or branches?
Use your own good judgment, and thoroughly inspect the plant.
These options are not available to you when you buy a plant that has to be shipped to you. But reputable nurseries are not going to ship you a diseased or un-healthy plant. They want customer satisfaction and repeat business.
There are a large number of nurseries across the US that propagate plants which are suitable for the South West, Stark Bros, Burpee’s, Henry Field’s, and Gurney’s to name a few. If you call or e-mail a nursery, let them know what type of plant you are looking for, your location, and elevation. They should be able recommend a suitable plant.
There are several nurseries that specialize in plants for the South West. Western States, Star Nursery, YuccaDo, Plants of the South West, and Desert Green Nursery are a few.
I have only been able to visit one of our local nursery’s Desert Sage Nursery on Morrow Avenue in Kingman. They have a variety of plants that will thrive locally.
Our local agriculture office has publications available: “Guide to Arizona Shade Trees” and “Landscape Plants for the Arizona Desert”.

When selecting plants be water wise. Can you make use of your gray water? Yes, it is legal to use gray water in Arizona.

The final question is, what guarantee comes with the plant? In my opinion a 90 day guarantee on a plant is useless. For trees, if it is not at least one year, I will move on to another source. I have dealt with one lawn and garden department that guaranteed the tree for one year. But when the tree died, in six months, I had to dig it up and physically return it to the store I purchased
it from. On the other hand, I had a tree shipped to me, that died (which was probably my fault) that was replaced with no questions ask.

Yes you can grow beautiful trees, shrubs, flowers etc. in our local dry arid climate. When you are ready to purchase plants, do research, gather as much information as you can. Being an informed consumer will be extremely beneficial to your success in propagating your newly purchased plants. Just be selective, what and where you purchase them.

Up coming workshops
October 13th- Desert Gardening - location Mohave Community College, 9:a.m. to noon, covering:
• Our Soil & how to deal with it
• Landscaping
• Seasonal planting
• Types of plants that grow well here
• Watering for survival
November 3rd Staking and Planting – location to be announced
• November thru January are good months to plant trees. The cooler months will give newly planted trees a chance to establish a healthy root system.

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