

What Do You Want to See at Local Garden Centers?

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For the Evansville Courier and Press, January 15, 2017

I presented a seminar early this month at the Indiana Green Expo in Indianapolis, on the subject of what I (as an arborist and educator) would like to see garden centers and nurseries carry. I concentrated on several major themes that I see almost daily as an extension educator, as well as from the questions and complaints I get from you, the consumer.

* Root ball depth: My biggest peeve went out to both the nurseries and the landscape planters: planting trees too deeply. Research shows that planting trees and shrubs too deeply can lead to early death of the plant, as well as trunk-girdling roots. I have been harping on this at my local professional trainings for nearly 10 years, and I still see contractors planting trees 4 to 12 inches too deep.

Part of this is the fault of whoever is planting (professional or homeowner), because they are not opening up the top of the burlap bag and brushing away the soil to find the root flare, which needs to end up at the level of the soil surface. But the biggest fault lies with nurseries (both local and out of town), who wind up putting excess soil on top of the root ball before the burlap is wrapped around it. If you plant the tree with the top of the root ball at surface level, you are automatically planting it too deeply. It would be cheaper and easier for all concerned if this was corrected at the nursery.

* Monocultures are bad: A monoculture is where the same plant is planted throughout a large area, to the exclusion of anything else. While this may be useful to farmers in corn and bean fields, it leads to problems in the landscape. We didn't learn our lesson when Dutch elm disease wiped out the American elm from our cities, because we filled the empty spots with ash trees, which are now dying from emerald ash borer. The most common replacement for dead ash trees are maples, which are the favorite food of Asian longhorned beetle, which is predicted to be the next major pest.

Fred Sievers, former columnist with the Evansville Courier, used to write about all the new and nifty plants he'd see on his travels. Readers would flock to local garden centers to buy them, only to find the same 6 or 10 species that garden centers always seem to carry. While things are somewhat better today at locally owned garden centers, gardeners are still over-relying on the same few species. Customers need to ask for different plants, and local nurseries and garden centers need to supply them. Even supplying more native species would be a step in the right direction.

* Invasive species: While no garden center sells such nasty things as kudzu anymore, there are many common landscape plants that have been causing severe environmental problems because they spread off-site. These include burning bush,

English ivy, periwinkle (Vinca), ornamental pear, and several others. Again: gardeners have to stop asking for them, and nurseries have to stop selling them.

What do YOU think local garden centers and nurseries should be providing that they're not? Write or email me your thoughts!