

## What You Should Look For at Garden Centers

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Last week in this space, I listed what I want to see garden centers and nurseries offer to sell to the public. Not just to homeowners, but to landscape installers as well. Now, I'm going to spend the next few weeks listing what you, the consumer, should be looking and asking for when you shop for plants. And the most important item is the least glamorous: roots.

When planting woody plants, it is critical to plant it at the same depth it was growing originally at the nursery. The easy way to do this is to make sure that the root flare is lined up with the rest of the bed or yard. If trees are planted too deeply, the existing roots will not get as much oxygen as they were used to and they will smother and die. Too shallow, and they will dry out and die.

But planting at the right depth is not as easy as one might think, especially when planting balled-and-burlapped (B&B) trees. Many trees are planted too deeply in the nursery; or, they are planted at the right depth, but cultivation throws excess soil over the roots. The result is that the root flare is buried and hidden under several inches of soil when it is wrapped in the burlap.

As I watch people plant trees, they normally will dig the hole as deep as the entire root ball, and then place the tree in. But, as I've just pointed out, this may be too deep! Instead, you should open the top of the bag and gently scrape the soil away until you find the root flare. Measure your ball height from this point, not from the top of the burlap.

As a consumer, when you got to buy a B&B tree, ask the salesperson to open the burlap and find the root flare for you. If it's buried only 3 or 4 inches, go ahead and buy it, but remember this when digging the hole, and scrape off the excess before planting. If the flare is buried more deeply than that, your "root ball" may be mostly a soil ball, with few actual roots. I personally wouldn't buy that tree.

Landscapers buying truckloads of plant stock should specify to the nursery that the root flares will be at, or within an inch or so of, the top of the root ball. Examine the first few trees coming off the truck: if the root flare is buried too deeply on each of them, reject the load. Or, plan on spending extra time exposing the root flare on each plant before digging holes. Because if the job has to be examined by myself or the city arborist, we may refuse to sign off on it until all the trees are replanted.

For more information on tree roots, please contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.

