

What You Should Look for in the Garden Center: Pest Resistance

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One of the best ways to control a pest is to buy plants that are resistant to the pest to begin with. Pest resistance has long been available to gardeners. Most of the modern hybrids of tomatoes, for example, are resistant to some of the most devastating diseases known to these crops, including fusarium and verticillium wilt diseases, tobacco-mosaic virus, and nematodes. Many of the most common vegetable varieties have been bred to resist a wide range of diseases, although this is not always clearly indicated on garden center tags.

This is also important when purchasing landscape plants. Sadly, most nurseries don't label their plants with this information. This may be because there is no resistance available to that species. Some garden centers may not be selling named cultivars, or are shipped generic unnamed varieties.

So it falls upon you, the buyer, to do some research. Start off by coming up with a list of species that you want to add to your landscape, remembering to use the information from my previous columns to avoid the same old/same old species that lead to monoculture, as well as skipping the species known to be invasive.

Next, learn as much as you can about the common pests of that species. There are some good books out there, but I find the best source for plants for southern Indiana is the Missouri Botanical Gardener Plant Finder:
<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/plantfinder/plantfindersearch.aspx>. You can type the name of your plant in there, and it will display a great deal of information about that plant, such as environmental needs, size, and common pests. In some cases, they list cultivars of a plant (like crabapple), and will include some information on pest resistance.

If your chosen plant has a long list of potential problems, you might want to avoid it. Even if your choice only has one or two pests, a little further reading might lead you to realize how big a problem it is. For example: many of the euonymus species are highly vulnerable to euonymus scale. I can count on one hand all of the landscapes I've visited over the years and NOT found scale on their euonymus shrubs. This pest is extremely difficult to get rid of, and I would certainly avoid all species of this plant.

Roses are another example. The older hybrid-tea roses are highly susceptible to black spot, a fungus disease that cause leaf drop. The newer Knockout roses are resistant to black spot...but are very susceptible to the lethal rose rosette virus.

And of course, I'd counsel against pin oaks because of horned oak gall; ash trees because of emerald ash borer; paper (white-bark) birches because of bronze birch borer; and maples because of Asian longhorned beetle. Why choose a plant with known problems?

For more information on choosing pest-resistant landscape plants, contact the Purdue Extension Service. Our phones appear to be working again at the moment, so call us at (812) 435-5287.