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Tree Shopping

Fall, like in the spring, is a good time to buy a nursery tree. So, if you're in the market for a tree this fall I'm sure you'll want to select the best one available. Trees are perhaps the most important landscape investment you'll make.

A typical tree shopper may visit two or more nurseries. This is a good thing to do not only to see what's available as far as tree selections go, but also to assess the quality of the nursery stock. It's also helpful to visit with the nursery staff to see what landscaping services are offered. Oftentimes, a tree shopper has a predetermined idea of what kind of tree he or she wants; however, seeking the opinion and an experienced nursery person can help firm up a suitable selection for the landscape.

I'm sure many folks agree that a good nursery tree should have a sturdy, straight trunk about four to five feet in height. Its branches should be evenly distributed and they should support a thick crown of lustrous, green leaves. No sign of disease or damage should be visible; this could indicate rough handling, sickly stock, or a lack of care while in production. However, tree shoppers may overlook the most important part of the nursery tree, its roots!

In the natural environment a seedling tree initially invests a significant amount of energy in growing a root system before its top develops. So, when you see a large nursery tree you should realize that the tree has already grown (or should have grown) an equally large root system. Tree roots are like a fully-stocked food pantry ready to supply the plant with the energy needed for rapid growth when spring arrives. In addition, the root system helps a newly planted nursery tree quickly stabilize itself in the ground, keeping it upright and making it resistant to stormy weather. For these (and many other) reasons it's important for the tree shopper to place the tree's roots high on the list when evaluating it for possible purchase.

Nursery trees should have a fairly good balance between their roots and their crowns. To serve as a guide the “American Standard for Nursery Stock” recommends a minimum root ball diameter of 16 inches for a 6 to 8-foot-tall field-grown, ball-in-burlap tree having a 1-inch caliper (this is the trunk’s diameter measured 6 inches above the soil line). Accordingly, a container-grown tree of the same size should be in a nursery pot no less than 5-gallons in capacity. Remember, you’re a smart tree shopper so be sure to take a close look at the roots before making your purchase decision.

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