

Way to Grow in Orinda

How to Pick the Perfect Plants for your Plot

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There are numerous factors to bear in mind when picking the perfect plants for your plot. Whether you're starting a complete remodel of your landscape or just replacing a few plants in your existing garden, it's best to avoid the common mistake of simply choosing what looks great at the nursery.

Start by considering the following factors. First, consider the issue of size. When judging a plant by its size, consider its ultimate growth potential, including not just the height and width of the shrub or tree, but also the size of its roots.

Few plants do well when forced to fit their space by over pruning. Most prefer to be left to grow to their own genetic potential. If the ultimate size works well for the space, you should then factor in the plant's rate of growth. Consider how much time you're willing to wait for it to reach full size. This will help to determine what size container you should start with. Trees are generally available in containers ranging from one gallon pots to 36" boxes, while shrubs and perennials are available in pots ranging from four inches to 15 gallons.

Once you've decided on the container size, you can calculate the cost to determine if the plant is as good a fit for your budget as it is for your space. Not only does the price of the plant increase with the size of the container, but so does the installation cost. Most plants require a hole dug 20 percent larger than their container. For this reason, large shrubs and box trees require additional installation costs.

One last consideration regarding container size is scale. If your house and property are expansive, starting with all small trees and shrubs will look out of balance and require a lot of time to fill the space. If your budget won't allow you to start with all large plants, then mix it up and get some large and some small choosing plants with faster growth rates in the smaller sizes.

Maintenance is also a consideration when picking the right plant. Judge the amount of leaves, needles, berries and seeds it may drop as well as the amount of pruning necessary. Plants near pools, ponds, driveways, walkways and those close to your home can require extra maintenance.

The third factor to think about is a combination of size and location as it relates to existing plant material. You don't want a shrub that grows so large that it chokes out or hides another garden favorite. Nor do you want a shade tree that will cast a shadow over your favorite garden sun lovers. Make sure you consider how your fence line choices will affect your neighbor's property. Blocking their best view, or planting a tree that will shade or drop leaves into their pool, or cast a large shadow over their vegetable garden will not get you invited over for a swim.

Here are some expensive mistakes to avoid:

1) A row of redwoods planted in a lawn inches away from a driveway. Ultimately, the roots and truck of these trees will destroy both the lawn and driveway. Redwoods grow fast, tall and wide.

2) A giant pine tree, weighing thousands of pounds, planted right on top of a retaining wall putting tons of pressure on the wall. Ultimately the tree had to be removed and the wall will need to be repaired.

3) A Deodar cedar planted three feet away from a swimming pool. This is a tree that, while beautiful when young, wants to be 100 feet tall by 50 feet wide. This tree fills the pool with tons of debris, robs it of any sunlight for most of the day, and has caused cracks in the pools plaster.

4) An Oak tree planted just three feet from a house with limbs inches from the eaves and the trunk less than two feet from a walkway. It doesn't take a horticulture degree to realize that in only a few short years this tree is going to start causing

many problems and will need to be removed.

5) English Laurels, a classic hedge that grows 10-to 12- feet high planted as a three foot hedge. This will take an enormous amount of maintenance to keep at three feet. There are better choices of dwarf shrubs available such as Zapolina Dwarf English Laurel.

6) European White Birch (*Betula pendula*) planted anywhere close to your home. People love this tree for its bright yellow fall color and classic white bark, its rapid growth and its size (it grows upwards of 40 feet tall with a canopy spanning about 20 feet wide) but it's a maintenance nightmare. It drops so many tiny leaves and seed pod dust that when planted near your home, it will shorten the life of your roof and gutters. It also hates pruning and has a high water demand. A much better choice for our climate and location is the Himalayan Birch, (*Betula jacquemontii*) This birch has a similar look with its white bark and golden fall foliage, and grows to about the same size, yet it's much less messy and best of all requires less water as it is native to an area of India with a very similar climate to ours.

The three key things to remember when picking the perfect plants are, first, that size matters, second, avoid high maintenance mess makers and, third, consider the plant's surroundings. Some great resources for finding a plant's ultimate height, and width, as well as root invasiveness, rate of growth and maintenance issues are Sunset's *Western Garden Book* and EBMUD's "Plant's and Landscapes for Summer Dry Climates." For those of you who prefer the online approach to plant research, Google away.

If you have any specific question on the topic of plant placement or species, feel free to email us at office@gardenlight-landscape.com.