

# HOW TO:

## Choose the best plants



**Janet Bitter**  
Master Gardener



Squash (top) and succulents (bottom) starts at the Master Gardener greenhouses.

A butterfly bush at the Master Gardener greenhouses. The Master Gardeners are preparing for the Plant & Garden Expo that will take place Saturday at the Douglas County Fairgrounds.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JANET BITTER

**Q**uestion: I love to go to plant sales and garden centers in the spring, but then I get so confused when I am shopping. How do I choose the best plants?

**A**nswer: It's finally spring. The best time of the year for plant shopping. Visions of that beautiful garden you've always wanted are dancing in your head. When I was a child, I remember reluctantly having to go fabric shopping with my mom. I'm pretty sure I scarred my own kids for life by dragging them along on my forays to nurseries and plant sales. We all must have a vice, I guess.

Well, not to put a damper on your dreams, but stop and take a step back before you head out to your favorite plant retailers. A little planning before you go will save you some frustration as well as get you closer to your dream garden. Before you head out to the garden center or plant sale, keep in mind the conditions of your site: amount of sun received, moisture availability or problems, any color scheme you have in mind, whether or not you want a plant with all season interest or just a summer annual, and so forth. Once you have in mind the location for your plant(s), you need to know how to select the best plant material.

Evaluate the shape and size of the plant. Is the size of the plant proportional to the size of the container? Bigger is not always better, especially when it comes to annuals and vegetable starts. Don't necessarily go for the tallest plant – if it's spindly and weak, it may never fully recover after transplanting. This is so true with annuals and vegetables – if it takes a month or so to recover, you've lost most of the growing season.

Check the foliage for signs of insects and disease. The foliage should be shiny and lush. Look for holes, brown spots, or other signs that could

mean the plant has a problem. Check for insects, especially on the undersides of leaves (this is particularly important with houseplants – you don't want to introduce any insect pests to any other plants you have in your home). A couple of holes doesn't necessarily mean trouble – plants go through a lot of trauma while being grown and moved around. Just be informed.

Are the roots growing out of the pot? Having a healthy root system is extremely important

for a healthy plant. Healthy roots are white, not mushy and brown. Sometimes plants are a little root-bound, but if the entire pot feels tight or bulging, it could be a sign that the plant is overgrown for that container. This is especially a problem for trees and shrubs. Conversely, if the soil is really loose it may indicate the plant was recently transplanted into a larger container and you may be paying for a small plant at a bigger container price.

Plants with buds or flowers

present are tempting, but remember that it is more important to look for plant form, health, and size than ones that happen to be flowering when you purchase them. Your healthy plants will put on a good show in your garden later.

Is it a variety that does well in our area? Read that label. Look for the scientific name and the variety. Most of us take our phones everywhere these days, so it is no problem to Google that specific variety and learn about its traits. If you purchase

a variety at a reputable local garden center, you can be fairly sure that variety is vetted for doing well in Douglas County conditions. Beware when ordering from national mail order nurseries – do your homework.

Now for the shameless plug: May 4 is the annual Douglas County Master Gardener's Plant Expo at the DC Fairgrounds from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The Expo will offer more than 15,000 plants including annuals, perennials, vegetables, shrubs, and trees along with native and pollinator plants, all carefully grown by volunteer Master Gardeners.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JANET BITTER

Photinia at the Master Gardener greenhouses. The Master Gardeners are preparing for the Plant & Garden Expo that will take place Saturday at the Douglas County Fairgrounds.

## BITTER

From page **B9**

Master Gardeners will be on hand to offer planting tips and advice. Sixty local vendors will offer garden-related items such as yard art, gardening supplies, tools and specialty plants. Master Gardeners will also hold drawings for fun prizes.

Food trucks will set up outside the Exhibit Hall. No pets, please, unless you need your certified service animal to accompany you.

Admission is \$3 and children under

12 are free. Proceeds from the Garden Expo help support education programs for the community that are offered by the Douglas County OSU Extension Master Gardeners.

---

*Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*