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IFAS EXTENSION

**Friday's Feature**

**By**

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### **Selecting a high quality tree**

Trees are the foundation of any landscape plan. They set the stage for the entire home landscape design. To a great extent, the type used and their location determine what other plantings are appropriate.

Trees are the most permanent plants we grow. Many will live and enhance the landscape for a hundred years or more if they are given a chance. Because of the permanency of trees and their importance in the landscape, care must be taken to select the best tree for each situation. The wrong tree, or one planted in the wrong spot, can actually detract from the overall landscape.

Most homeowners make the mistake of deciding what kind of tree they want and then trying to fit it into their landscape. A more positive approach is to decide where a tree is needed and what that tree should do in the landscape. After the desired type of tree has been determined, then it is much easier to select a species to fulfill these requirements.

Making a good choice of species is important. Choosing a high quality tree is of equal importance. Avoid trees that are susceptible to storm damage, ones that are hosts to destructive insect and disease pests and those that produce an overabundance of objectionable seed or fruit. The choice will generally depend on existing conditions at the planting site.

The quality or grade of a tree at planting can have a huge impact on its longevity in the landscape. Tree quality is generally based on trunk, branch and root characteristics.

In general, choose a tree that has a strong central trunk or leader. Large-maturing trees which are allowed to develop a double or multiple trunks should be avoided. Multiple leaders are a weak feature in a tree and can cause the tree to split apart as it grows. Except for small-maturing trees normally grown with multiple trunks, such as crape myrtle, nursery trees should have one trunk up through the center to the top of the tree.

A tree's root system can have a significant impact on its landscape performance. Defects on the main roots close to the trunk are difficult, if not impossible, to correct. Unfortunately, many people buy trees without accessing the health of the root system.

Evaluating a tree's root system requires you to actually remove the tree from the container. Trees with intact circling roots are not desirable. Roots circling close to the trunk can eventually slow growth and girdle the trunk. Circling roots at the top of the root ball are especially dangerous. Trees with this defect should be avoided.

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Trees planted with circling roots can lead to instability of the tree. Many trees fall in high wind conditions because they were planted with circling roots that never ventured far from the original root ball. Trees with smaller circling roots should have the roots severed before planting into the landscape.

Another important consideration in choosing the best tree possible is the branch angle. Major limbs should never touch the trunk--this is an indication of a narrow crotch angle and a weak branch. Choose trees with branches that have a "U" shaped attachment to the trunk. Avoid trees that have a "V" shape attachment.

A high quality tree will require less pruning after planting and they will establish more quickly. High quality trees that have been properly trained and pruned in the nursery will develop a structure which will be resistant to damage from winds and other outside forces.



A 5-year old loblolly bay tree fell over in a wind storm as a result of poor root distribution. Note the large circling roots.

**Tip of the Week:** The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Division of Plant Industry, has published a document called "Grades and Standards for Nursery Plants", which addresses tree quality. For more information on selecting a high quality tree visit <http://www.doacs.state.fl.us/pi/pubs.html>.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names in this article is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.