

What to look for when selecting a tree

Topic: Overall presentation

Q: Can I tell how healthy a tree is just by looking at it?

A: Signs to look for include:

- Is the tree uniform in colour? Good trees have a uniformity of colour across the leaves.
- Look for signs of physical damage and branch unions at good angles.
- Look for a focused growing point.
- Look for a balance between the size of the root ball and the tree itself.

Topic: Free of pests and disease

Q: How do you know if the specimen is free of pests and disease?

A: While a small amount of insect attack should not affect the viability of the tree it should only be present on less than 10% of the tree. Suppliers who produce premium material are supported by quality production processes and techniques, such as Integrated Pest Management (IPM) which focuses on obtaining a balance of natural elements and predators (not chemicals) to control pests. This encourages a healthy eco-system where the tree manages its own pest problems as it grows in the landscape.

Topic: Environmental sustainability

Q: How do you know if the nursery is genuine in its pursuit of environmental sustainability?

A: The Nursery and Garden Industry Association has a number of accreditation levels that aim to acknowledge stewardship in the area of sustainability. The Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme Australia (NIASA), awarded to production nurseries operating in accordance with 'best practice' guidelines, has recently been boosted by the introduction of an Environmental Management System (EMS) called EcoHort™ which assesses a nursery's pest and weed management programs, chemical use, water use and irrigation practices. Both schemes hold nurseries accountable for ongoing productivity in a responsibly sustainable way. Nurseries, like ourselves, that comply are awarded accreditation in recognition of their environmental leadership. For customers this equates to the supply of high quality, sustainably produced plant material and a place to go to for reliable, expert advice.

Topic: Balanced crown

Q: What is a balanced crown and is this absolutely necessary in a tree specimen?

A: A balanced crown is where the tree is uniformly dressed all the way around. While not strictly required for a healthy tree, it is a sign of well grown stock. It indicates structural integrity as growing conditions (sun and wind etc) has been managed evenly throughout each production phase. In theory, a balanced specimen with a good crown will have the strength to better withstand some of the stresses put upon it during planting and establishment in the landscape.

Topic: Uniform growth

Q: What is uniform growth and what does it tell you about a tree?

A: Uniform growth is exactly that – even growth achieved through steady and consistent performance. Over fertilising or applying fertiliser in a haphazard manner can have the tendency to vary growth rates resulting in poorly presented stock. A steady rate of growth provided in a best practice production environment will lend itself to uniform material.

Topic: Stem taper

Q: What is stem taper and is it relevant to tree selection?

A: Stem Taper is the progressive thickening of the trunk as you go down the tree and is easily noticeable. With trees grown in a production nursery stem taper is directly related to nursery practices. Again, poor or inconsistent fertiliser application, staking and irregular irrigation practices may be at fault resulting in poor uniformity and weakened stems.

Topic: Apical Dominance

Q: What is apical dominance and is this relevant to a good tree specimen?

A: The apical dominant point should be at the apex of the plant. This sounds simple but there is often a challenger for this position. The importance of this factor when selecting trees and plants that are going to be hedged cannot be underestimated. Failure of the crown with challenging leaders, often become a hazard with included bark and poor tree form in the future. It is often the reason of failure and subsequent removal of the tree.

Topic: Root direction and Root shoot ratios

Q: How big should a tree be in a container?

A: This very much depends on the genus and species that we are dealing with. It has more to do with volume than height. For example a fastigate tree (one that is narrow) has the capacity to be taller in a pot than a tree that naturally grows stoutly and rounded. The root to shoot ratio is all about the volume of the tree above the ground to the volume of the tree below the ground and the container that it is grown in. If there is a great volume of roots in a pot then there can be a greater volume of the tree.

For example: A *Cupressus sempervirens* *Glauc* in a 50lt pot can easily be sustainably grown to 3 metres tall. Being fastigate in form and quite heavy there is enough room for the tree to perform in a 50lt pot satisfactorily. However if we look at a *Waterhousia floribunda* in a 50lt container we like to keep these under 2.4 metres as they are a much fuller tree with greater foliage volume. Growing *Waterhousea* beyond 2.4m sustainably in a 50lt container restricts their height.

Topic: Formative Pruning

Q: What is formative pruning?

A: A tree that has been produced professionally has the structure to be sustainable in the long term. This is the result of **formative pruning**. As the tree is grown, pruning is carried out to promote good health and a strong branching framework allowing the tree to grow in a balanced manner. Early removal of potentially weak branches assures the mature tree will have a single dominant trunk and a crown requiring less pruning when established, limiting the development of weak structural features which may fail in latter life. The quality of junior material, and the time taken to develop strong tree specimens with effective canopies utilising formative pruning techniques, minimises longer-term maintenance costs and ensures the tree has greater life expectancy in the landscape.

Topic: The importance of Root Pruning

Q: Why Root prune?

A: **Root pruning** is vital and should be conducted every time potting occurs. The ability of the advanced tree to thrive post planting is clearly linked to the tree's root structure and its ability to anchor and support itself in soil. A strong root structure, like strong limbs are essential to selecting a premium specimen.

Topic: Tips for after-planting care

Q: Once the tree is planted, how much water is required and for how long?

A: This is a really difficult question to answer, but it is the biggest area of issues developing. More trees die of over watering than of under watering. It is important to monitor the moisture of the root ball as once they dry out they are difficult to re-wet.

The use of planting mixes that have wetting agents and nutrient and water crystals in them is a huge advantage and will reduce the stress that the tree experiences once planted. When watering plants always water twice close together then leave for a time.

Look at soil types:

- If you are planting into sandy soils more water is required than in a clay soil. Sandy soils will need 2-3 waters per week
- Trees being planted into clay soils should get a maximum of 2 waters per week. It is better to have them a little drier than wetter, as this encourages the roots to explore and also ensures adequate oxygen for good root growth.

The above notes emphasize the importance of buying from a reputable nursery who can demonstrate clear quality aims and environmentally measurable outcomes. Building a relationship with a nursery goes a long way to adding confidence to the landscape design as it allows focus on solution-based tree and plant selections based on the particulars of the project.

Inspection of our stock is always welcome as is advice on new and existing lines for landscape and amenity use. For more information, please contact Speciality Trees on 03 9796 8308 or email us at sales@specialitytrees.com.au.