

# Selecting the “Right” Plant

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You are heading out the door to buy plants because:

1. You just received a design for your new landscape, or
2. You had some plants in your landscape that died, or
3. You want a different look for your landscape.

Selecting the right plants is critical to creating a successful, low maintenance landscape. In and around Albuquerque, the plants that work best are either native or well-adapted to our environment. As an added bonus, they are often low water users.

Unfortunately, what often grabs your attention at a nursery or big-box store is whatever’s in bloom. While it’s nice to know (and plan for) what color you’ll have in your garden, that’s not the best way to select plants. Plant growers and retailers target major markets such as California and the East Coast when they develop and market plants. In Albuquerque you have to know more about plants to be successful since a number of retailers sell plants which are completely inappropriate for our soil, sun, temperatures, and wind. While these plants grow very well in California or in places with acid soil they fail miserably here.

The term “good plant selection” as used in this article means both:

1. Learning good plant choices for your environment and location before you go to the nursery so you know what to buy for the most success, and
2. Once you’re at the nursery, choosing the right specimen within the plant species.

## ***Before you go to the nursery:***

To get it right, you’re going to have to invest a little time to learn what plants are appropriate, and which ones to avoid. The good news is that it’s easy to do, and there are numerous ways to get educated.

- You can read books such as Judith Phillips’ *New Mexico Gardeners Guide*, review the list of plants at the back of the city’s xeriscape guide or in the Master Gardener book on gardening *Down to Earth*, or look at local grower catalogs (e.g. Plants of the Southwest or High Country Gardens) that describe plants which do well here.
- Then you can visit places where you can see plants growing in a landscape, e.g. the botanic garden, UNM, the Xeriscape demonstration garden at the Wyoming APD station, or the Albuquerque Garden Center gardens in Los Altos Park. Talk to people associated with these gardens and ask questions about the plants.

Next you’ll need to consider what function you want the plant to perform. Does it need to provide shade, act as a windbreak, catch your eye as a specimen plant, block an ugly view, or help with erosion? Look for plants that can perform the function you want.

If you're replacing a few plants, make a list of what died in your landscape and using your new-found education, consider what plants could be used to replace the dead ones. Try to figure out why the previous plant failed. If you replace it with the same plant, will it fail again? Take the "dead plants and possible replacements list" with you to the nursery so you don't "impulse buy".

You also need to understand the conditions where you intend to put the plant. This means knowing your soil type (e.g. native or improved, clay/sand/loam, acid or alkaline), sun exposure (e.g. morning or afternoon, full sun or part shade), reflected heat (e.g. light colored walls or gravel mulch), natural water available (e.g. near a downspout or canals), and the amount of **space available for the mature size of the plant**. Don't forget to consider root growth space for trees (that's 2-4 times the canopy size).

You'll need to know your USDA cold hardiness zone – we're zone 7 in most of Albuquerque, zone 6 in the East Mountains, and zone 8 in the far South Valley. The hardiness zone number represents the annual average minimum temperature and can be found on plant tags. You should choose only plants with a number that's less than or equal to your zone if you want them to overwinter.

### ***At the nursery:***

You'll need to find the tag that's usually inserted into the pot and read it. You should be able to find the following information on the tag:

- the scientific name of the plant
- sun requirements
- distance to leave between plants when planting
- **size at maturity**, and
- cold hardiness zone (minimum average temperature).

You may also find water usage, growth rate, heat zone (a measure of the number of days over 86 degrees) and fertilization information on the tag. You can now match this with your planned planting location. If your plant doesn't have a tag, either select another pot of the same plant or move the tag to your plant. Keep the tag for future reference. If the plant tag shows a hardiness zone number greater than 7, treat it like an annual – it probably will be and if there's no hardiness zone on the tag, it's definitely an annual. For the plant to survive the winter, you'll need to bring it inside.

Look for healthy bug and disease free plants.

1. Look for proportional plants in the container, that is, not too large for the container (may be root bound) or too small (may just have been potted up to the larger container, whose price you now get to pay).
2. Make sure the plant isn't potted too deeply in the container. Before planting you'll have to remove all potting soil above the topmost root. Plants that have been potted too deeply grow more slowly.
3. Leaves should not be torn or missing from a section of the plant. This could be caused by wind when transporting the plant or it may be a disease or other problem.

4. Container grown plants should have roots to the edge of the container, but not massed or circling or peeking out of holes on the bottom of the container. You can scratch the top of the soil near the container's edge to see how thick the roots are.
5. For trees, choose ones with a strong healthy trunk or, in the case of naturally multi-trunked trees, all trunks should be strong and healthy. Branches should be spaced evenly around and up the trunk like a spiral. Fifty percent of the leaves should be in the lower two-thirds of the tree or shrub. The trunk should be tapered from the top (narrow) to the base (wide). Avoid trees whose trunk is cylindrical where it enters the soil in the container. Avoid trees with dead branches or suckers at the base. Definitely avoid single-trunked trees whose leader (main trunk through the tree) has been cut. Growers do this to make the tree look fuller, but it takes years to correct and usually creates a hazard tree.
6. Trees should **not** be staked in the container. This creates a weak trunk since it doesn't move in the wind and becomes inflexible.
7. As plants are potted up to the next size circling roots should be uncurled or even slit vertically by the nursery. If you see a clear sign of the smaller pot, avoid the plant. I call this the pot within a pot syndrome and it's hard to grow the plant successfully after this has occurred.

For annuals and perennials choose smaller pots, less than a gallon in size with lots of buds but few blooms open. That way you see what the color is, but you get to enjoy the blooms from buds. The plants typically grow quickly and will establish better. I prefer 4" pots. For shrubs, I prefer a one gallon size. Most xeric shrubs grow significantly after the third year in the ground. For trees, I prefer a 5 gallon size or 1-2" caliper. Like people, smaller plants adapt to their new environment better and faster than larger plants. The roots adapt more quickly to the soil and the stem/trunk to the wind. Also, smaller plants cost less and if the plant dies, you're out less money.

Finally, remember that just because the plant comes in a gallon container doesn't mean it will stay that size forever. You could be purchasing a 10' high x 10' wide shrub – surprise!

Hopefully you'll be more successful and happier with your landscape by following these suggestions.