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NAVIGATING NURSERIES


by ANN-MARIE BENZ and MAYA ARGAMAN


Walking into a nursery can feel like being a kid in a candy store. It's exciting, but it can also be overwhelming, even when you know what you're looking for. Have you ever gone into a nursery and completely forgotten about your list? Have you gotten lost looking at plants and ended up distracted by all of the possibilities? Have you ever purchased plants and brought them home, only to realize that they aren't suitable for your site?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above, you're in good company—it happens to everyone, even experienced gardeners. To minimize the chances of a badly-planned nursery visit, we asked several experienced nursery owners for advice. Here are some tips from Nicole Calhoun, co-owner of Artemisia Nursery in Los Angeles, Laura Hanson, co-founder of The

Watershed Nursery in Port Richmond, and Ron Vanderhoff, manager of Roger's Gardens in Corona del Mar.

Are there certifications or other kinds of credentials I should look for in a nursery before I go on a shopping spree?


 **Laura:** Ask about their Best Management Practices (BMP) to ensure that they have strong phytosanitary practices [sanitary practices that prevent the transmission of pathogens like *Phytophthora*] in place. Signs that one could look for include plants that look healthy, are free of weeds, and placed above ground so that they are not exposed to sitting water.

 **Nicole:** The nursery doesn't have to exclusively specialize in California native plants, but having

that specialization usually indicates that one or more of the staff members has a dedicated interest in native plants.

How can I avoid being overwhelmed? There are so many choices!

Ron: My advice may contradict popular opinion: don't do too much research before you visit a nursery.

 Instead, visit a nursery first, walk the beds, and take notes of plants that seem promising. Then, go back home and do your research on those specific plants. This focused research will provide you details about those plants. Now you are ready to return to the nursery, buy your plants, and create your native plant paradise without all that frustration.

LEFT: Dudleyas and poppies add the colors of sunrise to your native plant gardens.

Nicole: Let your planting site be your guide! Take note of your sun exposure, soil type, and water delivery system (drip irrigation, spray from your neighbor's sprinklers, etc.). Limit yourself to looking at plants that are compatible with your site.

I'm an impulse plant shopper, which often leads to dead plants. Is there a better way?

Ron: Have a plan, work within a theme and purchase according to it. Many nurseries will carry a small selection of what is available at any given time, and that can be incredibly limiting to your creativity and your enthusiasm. Don't let it be—play and have fun. Give the nursery three or four choices and some flexibility in sizes, and you'll have a more satisfying experience and better success. Also, give the nursery a month to source them, not a week.

Laura: If you make an impulse purchase but don't have the time or energy to transplant your plants just yet, it's helpful to stage them in an area that you will see each day to remind you to check on them and water as needed until you can plant them.

Are there certain times of year when I should plan to go to a nursery?

Nicole: Some plants may only be available on and off throughout

the year. So if you're looking for specific plants, contact your local native plant nursery in advance.

Ron: If your native plants are from the summer-dry areas of California, plant them during the wet, rainy season so they have plenty of time to settle in and push out their roots before the rains end and the heat begins. But, if the native plant is from a summer-moist area, they might be as happy going in during the drier half of the year. In other words, know your plants' natural growing season and let them guide your shopping.

How can I safely transport my plants home?

Nicole: Pack them into sturdy boxes that are open on top but offer support on the side so that the plants don't tip over in the car.

Laura: It's also a good idea to strap them in or cushion them so that they don't fall over while driving.

Any preparations I should make before I buy new plants, to ensure their chances of survival?

Nicole: Remove weeds from the area. Consider sheet mulching the planting area to help suppress weeds, retain moisture, and increase organic matter in the soil. Plan ahead for how you will get water to the plants, especially during the establishment phase when they need more frequent care.

Laura: Keep in mind that the watering frequency depends on your soils, time of year, and habitat conditions.

Plants can be so expensive. What's the best way to economize when buying native plants?

Laura: Sign up for email lists to be notified of plant sales, use plant species that spread or can be divided to fill spaces, and plant your garden one section at a time.

Nicole: Start small! Four-inch and one-gallon plants are the most economical. A one-gallon plant will often catch up with its five-gallon counterpart if they are planted side by side at the same time.

Ron: A common misconception is that a bigger plant is the better plant. Smaller (younger) plants are less rootbound, will acclimate to your soil environment more quickly, and will almost always grow to be bigger and healthier than the four-foot plant you originally passed up on.

How can I pick out the best plants from the batch?

Ron: Compare the plants in the bed and look for those with more uniform and well-developed branching. Obviously, observe the general health of the plant, but be sure to distinguish between a plant that is unhealthy versus one that is simply not in season. I would rather plant scruffy plants—at the right time of the year—than big, rootbound plants in full bloom at the end of their growing season.