

Acquiring quality nursery stock is key to ensuring long-term success of each tree – whether you're a homeowner purchasing a single tree for your yard or a volunteer purchasing several trees for a project.

This guide explains what to consider when purchasing trees, common mistakes to avoid, how to solicit bids, and how to effectively work with nursery staff.

Trees Forever encourages you to purchase from local, full-time nursery growers or retailers that offer a diversity of species and quality stock. Buying trees this way helps keep the dollars local, promotes good long-term relations with the nursery, and provides you with access to technical advice from a local expert. However, buying local and seeking the lowest cost should not be the only considerations when purchasing trees. Quality trees should have associated costs. Remember: "You get what you pay for."

Things to Consider When Purchasing Trees

What to Look For

Ask for quality nursery stock and inspect trees for these characteristics before purchasing:

- Good form with a single straight leader and evenly spaced branches along the trunk that are balanced on each side. There should be no diseased or injured branches.
- For container-grown trees, root flare should be at the soil surface (not buried) and soil should cling to the roots when the tree is removed from the container (rather than soil falling away from the roots). Roots should not encircle the root ball because this can eventually cause the roots to girdle the tree and shorten a tree's life.
- A good ratio of shoot (above ground) to root (below ground). Many people focus more on the size and appearance of the above-ground portion of the tree; the root system of a tree is just as important.
- Healthy leaves, free of spots.



- A healthy trunk free of injuries and decay. If a tree was grafted to root stock, the graft union should be free of decay.
- Balled and burlapped and container-grown trees should be firm in the root ball; the tree should not sway when pulled gently.
- Trees that can stand on their own without support. Trunks should not be propped up by staking material.
- For larger trees, make sure pruning has been done correctly.

Order Early

Place your orders as early as possible to ensure that the species you seek is available. Just as volunteers need ample time to more effectively plan tree-planting events, nursery professionals are better able to meet your project needs when provided with sufficient order lead time. For a list of Iowa Nursery and Landscape Association (INLA) member nurseries, see www.iowanla.org. In Illinois visit the Illinois Green Industry Association at www.ina-online.org/.

Diversity

While there are many ways to think about tree species diversity, the most important consideration is to have a diversity of kinds of trees (known as “genera”). For example, a project that includes the five different genera of *Quercus* (oak), *Gymnocladus* (Kentucky coffee tree), *Acer* (maple), *Celtis* (hackberry), and *Tilia* (linden) is far more resilient to disease and other adversities than a project that includes only five different maple species, such as Norway, Amur, Sugar, etc. Don’t sacrifice diversity for convenience. You may have to do business with a couple different nurseries to get the mix and size of species you desire.

Consider Pests and Diseases

Each year, State Forest Health Highlights are issued detailing the most up-to-date pest, disease, and environmental threats and current status of forests. To see your state’s report, visit the US Forest Service website at <http://fhm.fs.fed.us/fhh/fhmap.html>. Also visit your state’s DNR website for more information.

Specify Trees Grown in Your Hardiness Zone

Talk to your nursery about the seed source (or if purchasing a grafted tree, the root source) of the trees you purchase. Seek trees grown locally from local seed or root stock. Nursery stock grown in a hardiness zone south of where it will be planted may not be cold hardy. Trees Forever supports local tree growers and encourages volunteer leaders to help increase the demand for these trees. In Iowa, most of the state is Zone 5 with some northern locations located in Zone 4. The northern half of Illinois is Zone 5 and the lower half is Zone 6, with a small section at the southern tip in Zone 7. See a U.S.D.A. Hardiness Zone map at <http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb>.

Types of Trees

Trees may be purchased bare-root, balled and burlapped, or container-grown. For a list of pros and cons of each of these, see our [Tree Planting Guide](#) resource guide. It is also important to specify the size of tree you want.

American Standard for Nursery Stock ANSI Z60.1

Nursery stock should comply with the latest edition of the *American Standard for Nursery Stock*. Ask for a copy of the publication at your local nursery or find online at americanhort.org/documents/ANSI_Nursery_Stock_Standards_AmericanHort_2014.pdf.



It is especially important that each tree has a good “shoot-to-root ratio.” In other words, the above-ground portion should be proportional to the size of the root ball. Trees that are held at a nursery over a few seasons may get too tall for the size of container they are in.

Obtain Multiple Bids before Purchasing

It is best to obtain bids from at least two nurseries for comparison and to ensure appropriate use of funding. When you issue a request for bids, keep these requirements in mind:

- Request a diverse mix of trees by including some less common species in your bid. Do not allow a nursery to substitute your selections for more common species.
- Specify the quality standards for the trees you are ordering on the bid sheet. (See “What to Look For” on page 1.)
- Specify a date that trees should arrive that is a few days before a planting event. This allows time to inspect and, if necessary, reject trees that do not meet specifications.
- Ask about policies for replacing stock that dies. Some nurseries provide a one-year guarantee, while others only guarantee stock planted by their staff.
- Consider negotiating for discounts and guarantees.

When reviewing bids, keep in mind that the nursery with the lowest prices may not have quality stock or worthwhile guarantees. It may be better in the long run to pay more for healthier, quality trees.

Moving Trees Not Grown by a Commercial Nursery

The Code of Iowa states that all trees moved in Iowa must be inspected and certified by the Iowa Department of Agriculture. Even donated trees must be inspected to ensure that no pests are transported. To make arrangements for an inspection, contact the State Entomologist's office in Des Moines at www.iowaagriculture.gov/entomology.asp.

In Illinois, nursery inspections are required and a list of inspected facilities can be accessed at www.agr.state.il.us/Environment/nursery. For questions about moving and inspections of nursery stock in Illinois, call (815) 787-5476.

Additional Resources

University of Illinois Extension
<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/treeselector>

Your Roadmap for Selecting and Planting Trees
 Linn County (Iowa) REC and Trees Forever publication

Bid for Home Town Trees Forever – Spring Tree Planting

Item Number	Quantity	Species	Size	Quality	Unit Price	Amount Bid
1	5	Japanese tree lilac, <i>Syringa reticulata</i>	#7	Trees should have single central leader, balanced branching, and trunks free or injury. Roots should be grown in their pots at least one growing season but not strongly encircle root ball. Tree should stand without supports.		
2	12	Kentucky coffee tree, <i>Gymnocladus dioicus</i>	#7			
3	6	Princeton Sentry Ginkgo, <i>Ginkgo biloba</i>	#10			
					TOTAL =	

** Trees should arrive by April 24 for inspection.

*** Please include delivery charges separately; we may be able to pick up the trees, depending on cost.

****Please include your policy/cost on guaranteeing trees.

Providing nurseries with a bid sheet is an effective way to obtain the information your group needs to make the best decision on which nurseries to buy stock from. This example demonstrates how you might format a bid sheet and include specifications for delivery and guarantees.

Join Trees Forever on its mission to plant and care for trees and the environment by empowering people, building community and promoting stewardship.

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