

How to survive the garden centre

Avoid feeling dazed and confused at the nursery with these helpful tips

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Walking into a busy garden centre can be an overwhelming experience — at this time of year, there is an abundance of choice. And if you don't have complete confidence in your green thumb, where do you even begin? We spoke to experienced gardeners for tips on navigating the rows of annuals and perennials.

Draft a list

The first piece of advice comes from Gardenfix garden coach Helen Battersby, who also co-writes the popular blog *Toronto Gardens*: “Just like not bingeing when grocery shopping, never set foot inside without a list,” she warns. “Allow yourself maybe one impulse item, but have a budget for it.”

Even if you're not completely sure what you'll discover at the nursery, you can still itemize what you need — one shrub for the sunny front corner of the yard, 10 annuals for the shady garden border, etc.

Know your garden

Make note of the conditions in different areas of your garden. For example, if you have a hot, dry patch you're looking to fill, consider drought-tolerant plants that will

thrive in this environment. Read the plant tag carefully to determine if you're choosing the right specimen.

You might even consider not buying anything on your first visit. Battersby calls these “reconnaissance missions” and they can happen anytime throughout the year.

“If you need to see fall foliage colour, visit in fall. Then come back in spring to buy,” she explains.

Make your plants pop

Faced with a rainbow of hues, it helps if you know what colours you'd like to introduce to your garden. Group pots together in your cart to see how they'll look together in containers or in your plot.

“Think about plant partners, meaning what plant might look good growing beside another based on the colour of the foliage and or the size and texture of the leaves,” recommends Paul Zammit, director of horticulture at the Toronto Botanical Garden.

“For example,” he suggests, “combine a gold-leaved plant with a burgundy foliage plant and combine plants with large leaves with those that have fine foliage, like hostas with ferns.”

Plan for continuous blooms

Reach for plants that bloom at different times.

“To ensure seasons of colour, try to spread out the blooming time of the plants you buy — buy one plant that indicates it flowers in spring, another



SHUTTERSTOCK

Busy garden centres can be overwhelming, so make a list of what you need and don't hesitate to ask for a little green-thumb advice.

that flowers in summer and another that flowers in the fall,” recommends Zammit.

Plant for pollinators and other beneficial insects

With all the buzz about attracting bees, butterflies and other beneficial insects to your garden, Miriam Goldberger, author of *Taming Wildflowers* and co-owner of Wildflower Farm in Coldwater, Ont., recommends planting these native plant standouts: monarda, blanketflower, coreopsis, blue and white false indigo, goldenrod, the liatris family (blazingstars) and the echinacea family (coneflowers).

“Native plants have co-evolved with the bees, butterflies and beneficial insects.” Grasses, such as prairie dropseed, little bluestem and indiangrass, serve as shelter for these

beneficial insects over the winter, as well as protection from summer heat and intense rainfalls, she says.

“Remember to give monarchs a two-part wildflower nutrition program,” Goldberger says. “Milkweeds for making monarch babies and liatris, echinaceas, goldenrod and asters for the nutritional boost monarchs need for their treacherous journey south.”

Before purchasing wildflowers, Goldberger says to be certain they were not dug from the wild.

Deciding which pots to take home

Once you've picked out a plant, how do you know which one to reach for from the flat?

“When selecting individual plants, taller is not always better,” says Zammit. “I prefer to select plants that are more branched (bushy) with lots of

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GARDENFIX GARDEN COACH

active growth at their base.”

Also, avoid pots that have roots poking through the holes at the bottom.

“The shrimp is less likely to be pot-bound,” says Battersby. “If you need to see what it's like in flower, look at the overgrown ones, but take home the little guy. Less is more.”

And go for buds over blooms. It's better if your plants open in your garden rather than at the garden centre.

Avoid certain plants

Goldberger says to keep an eye out for non-native plants such as goutweed, vinca and Japanese knotweed that can be aggressive spreaders — and that are nearly impossible to remove!

“If you don't know much about a plant, ask at the garden centre or do some research on your own before making that purchase,” she advises.

Enjoy your garden

Once you've planted everything, follow the plant tag for care instructions, such as fertilizer and water requirements. And keep your receipts. Most garden centres will offer refunds or exchanges on plants that turn out to be duds.

Also, if your community does not accept plastic plant pots in the recycling bin, Zammit recommends checking to see if your garden centre has a program in place to take them back. Happy planting!