

Saving Money at the Garden Center

Don Kinzler, NDSU Extension Horticulturist for Cass County

Following are 25 Tips for Saving Money at the Garden Center

1. Prices of plants at national chain stores might be lower than locally owned garden centers, but plants offered at the locally owned business are often specially selected to better suit local growing conditions, making them the better value.
2. Before you go to the garden center, make a list of plants you want and need, based on planning, to reduce impulse purchases.
3. Line your trunk in advance with plastic or cardboard to save trunk cleanup time.
4. Write down the measurements of containers, flowerbeds and landscape areas, so you, or garden center staff, can better determine the number of plants needed, so money isn't spent on plants for which there's no room.
5. Shop Monday through Thursday if possible, avoiding hectic garden center weekends, so you can concentrate better on your purchases.
6. Don't be fooled by buying and planting during a false early spring, during which newly planted material can be killed.
7. Look for price signs at the garden center so you stick within your budget. Prices aren't always in obvious places.
8. When shopping for annual flowers, get the most for your money by selecting healthy, energetic plants that are well-branched, not leggy, and have rich green foliage. Plant structure and health is more important at this stage, than whether the plants are flowering.
9. Select perennials that are well-branched and have multiple shoots at the base. Choosing long-lived perennials might be the better buy versus those that have a shorter lifespan.
10. The best buy in vegetable transplants are those with dark green foliage and are without flowers at this young stage.
11. When buying shrubs, look at the tag to determine the mature width, and provide this "footprint" of space, to avoid planting too closely, which wastes money.
12. Check hardiness zones of shade and fruit trees to avoid buying non-adapted types.
13. When examining plants at the garden center, be gentle, so the next customer will get their money's worth with undamaged plants.
14. If a new landscape's budget is tight, invest in trees first, as they take longer to develop.
15. Landscapes and perennial beds require time to develop and fill. Avoid the temptation to overbuy and make them look instantly "full." Instead, incorporate less expensive annual flowers the first few years to provide color and impact while the permanent plants develop.
16. Buy smaller "starter plants" which will end up the same size but are less expensive than larger "instant" plants.
17. When buying perennials, look for plants that have multiple crowns that can be immediately divided. Purchasing one plant can yield two, three, or maybe even four divisions.
18. If flowering containers appear immediately full, there's no room for the plants to grow and we've spent more money than needed for a healthy container.
19. When planting an annual flowerbed, stretch the planting distance to the space recommended on the tag. Planting closer than needed requires more plants and more cost.

Saving Money at the Garden Center, Cont.

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20. Bare-root trees, shrubs and perennials are usually less expensive than potted types and perform as well or better.
21. Consider planting a tree from an acorn or black walnut fruit.
22. Some existing shrubs can be divided, such as Annabelle-type hydrangea, potentilla, spirea.
23. Space landscape plants appropriately, so less are needed, and so they perform to their potential.
24. Unless a lawn is a solid carpet of weeds, spot-spraying with herbicide is more economical than weed-and-feed products that are broadcast over the entire lawn.
25. To keep plants healthy once you get them home, do not leave them in the garage for more than overnight.
 - A. Garden Center plants were produced in high light greenhouses, and plants will quickly languish and go downhill if kept in a dimly lit garage until you're ready to plant them.
 - B. Instead, if you've purchase plants earlier than you need them, use the time to "harden off" the plants, gradually getting them accustomed to outdoor sunshine and wind. Begin by placing plants in a location sheltered from strong wind and glaring sun. Gradually expose plants to greater air movement and transition them to their final light exposure, whether sun or shade.
 - C. Remember to check plants daily for watering needs until you're ready to plant them, never letting them wilt, as some plant types won't recover from that level of dryness.
 - D. If frost threatens while you're hardening off your pots and packs of plants outdoors, move them into the garage or frost-free location overnight, but return them outdoors when temperatures rise.

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Don Kinzler, NDSU Extension Cass County Horticulturist
701.241.5700 or donald.kinzler@ndsu.edu

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