

Is Bigger Better?

The growers vs. the showers

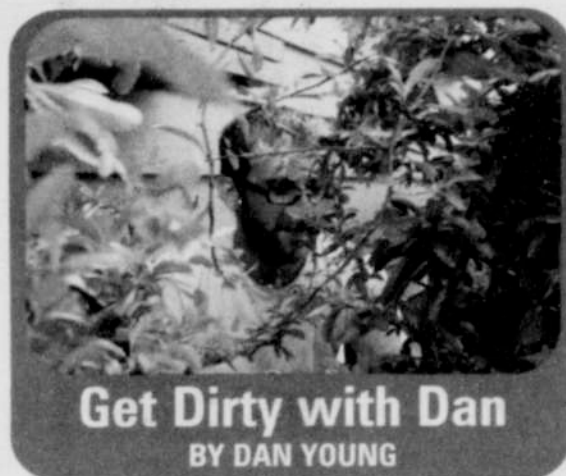
A while ago, I got an e-mail from a man named Donald. I knew right away it was one I would have to save to respond to later. The real question he was asking was one I've thought myself, and I'm sure many of you out there have, too. Is bigger really better? Well...I wish I could really answer that question here, but I'm supposed to be writing about gardening. I also held onto the gem of a letter because the fall is a great time to plant. Doing this gives plants a head start on next spring. Lots of nurseries are running sales to clear out stock. Really, who can resist a bargain?

The following is Donald's e-mail to me.

DEAR DIRTY DAN:

My husband and I just bought a house on two lots, so we have a lot of space to plant. We've agreed on what and where...but the debate, as it usually is, is about size. He read somewhere that the way to save money with a new garden is to buy lots of small plants; they're cheaper, and if they establish themselves, you're home free. I see this as a waste of money; the little ones never thrive, if they even survive the Oregon winter. I read somewhere that the way to go is to buy fewer, larger plants; the survival rate is better, the immediate gratification level is high, and you're not wasting money on plants that will die. He sees this as a needless expenditure. I'm sure that the truth is somewhere in between. What are your thoughts? (We're talking perennials and grasses here, mostly.)

There really are advantages to both sides of this debate. It's definitely true that buying smaller plants will save you money. Buying plants,



especially perennials in 4-inch pots, at this time of the year might be the hard part. The selection just isn't what it is in the spring. Something I always do when buying plants is check to see how well-rooted or overrooted something is. Never be afraid to tip it upside down and pull the pot off to see what's down there. Plants with no or few roots showing at the side of the pot might be a sign of a weak plant. The plant might want a bit more time in the nursery. Plants that are nothing but roots can be stressed out from lack of water or fertilizer. This doesn't mean there is no hope for them. When talking about perennials and grasses, it's easy enough to cut a corner off the root ball to encourage roots to break free of their former pot shape once in the ground. If you work your garden soil and mulch, I don't see any reason why the little ones couldn't make it through the Oregon winter.

When planting a new garden, it's nice to

have a few things that make it look like you have accomplished something. That's where bigger can be better. For instance, buying grasses in large pots might actually save you some money. Don't be afraid to attack five-gallon grasses with a hacksaw. They have probably had this done to them before. You can often get five or six plants out of one pot. These divisions will root out by spring and be beautiful by midsummer. Buying larger trees and shrubs can give you an instant backbone to your new garden beds. I don't mean for you to go out and buy anything that needs a forklift to be planted, but something with a bit of size is always nice. Again, especially at this time of year,

make sure the plants look like they are in good health. Check the roots on woody plants, making sure they aren't horribly rootbound. I have planted my fair share of rescue plants and know that often trees that started out rootbound never rooted out into the soil very well. If you are wondering what I really think about the whole thing, it goes like this: I never plant anything that is already taller than I am. I prefer the growers, not the showers. 10

To reach DIRTY DAN, who will answer any and all of your gardening questions, simply e-mail dirtydthegardener@yahoo.com.



The time to plant perennials is upon us, but selection may be sparser than in spring.

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