

## Selecting Right Tree From Nursery Not Child's Play

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — When it comes to selecting quality trees at your local nursery or garden center, it isn't easy seeing green, according to a horticulture specialist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"The sheer numbers of plants and the blast of visual information often can overwhelm your ability to recognize a quality plant," said Jim Sellmer, assistant professor of ornamental horticulture. "It takes concentration, sharp eyes and

clear thinking to evaluate plants." Sellmer says consumers first should evaluate a plant's above-ground quality.

• Ratio of height to diameter. On average a tree with a trunk diameter of 1.5 inches measured at a point six inches above the ground should have a height of about 12 feet. "Although it varies with species, do not choose trees that are excessively tall for their diameter," Sellmer said. "If the tree is 16 feet or more, this may mean the tree was collected wild or grown too close together, which produces weaker plants that do not transplant well and are prone to being blown down."

• Plant form. Trees should have well-spaced branches spread out uniformly on the trunk. Inspect the branch structure closely before buying "Branches that are growing close to each other or crossing one another when young will grow into each other as the tree ages," Sellmer explained. "That will weaken the tree and make it more susceptible to damage."

If the tree is a variety that has a strong central trunk, avoid choosing trees with clustered growth at

the top, which can produce branches with narrow angles that can weaken the tree. "For street use, choose a single-stem tree that has had its lower limbs properly pruned in the nursery," Sellmer said. "The tree should have the proper height-to-width ratio, and limbs should not obscure visibility or interfere with signs or pedestrian and vehicle traffic."

• Plant health. The general health of a tree can be evaluated by examining foliage color and density. Foliage should be lush green. Light green or yellow foliage indicates the tree may have been underfertilized. "When trees are dug out at nurseries, 90 to 95 percent of their roots are left in the ground," Sellmer said. "Their survival depends on rapid root regeneration, and a weak and unhealthy looking tree will not transplant well."

• Plant growth. Examine branch growth for each year. Sellmer says

branch growth may be visibly stunted the year a tree was planted in the nursery. In subsequent years, branch length should increase. If recent growth appears stunted, try to determine why. "It could be drought or poor fertility, or the tree may have been dug out previously," he said.

• Signs of injury. Inspect the trunk to make sure the bark has not been damaged. Torn bark reduces the movement of water and nutrients and makes the tree susceptible to infection from decay organisms.

"When the tree is delivered, inspect it for any signs of insect or disease damage," Sellmer said. "Look for cankers, scale or borer damage on the trunk. Look for scale, caterpillars, severe aphid infestations or diseases in the foliage. If the problem cannot be treated easily, do not buy the tree. If you've already purchased the tree, return it to the nursery."



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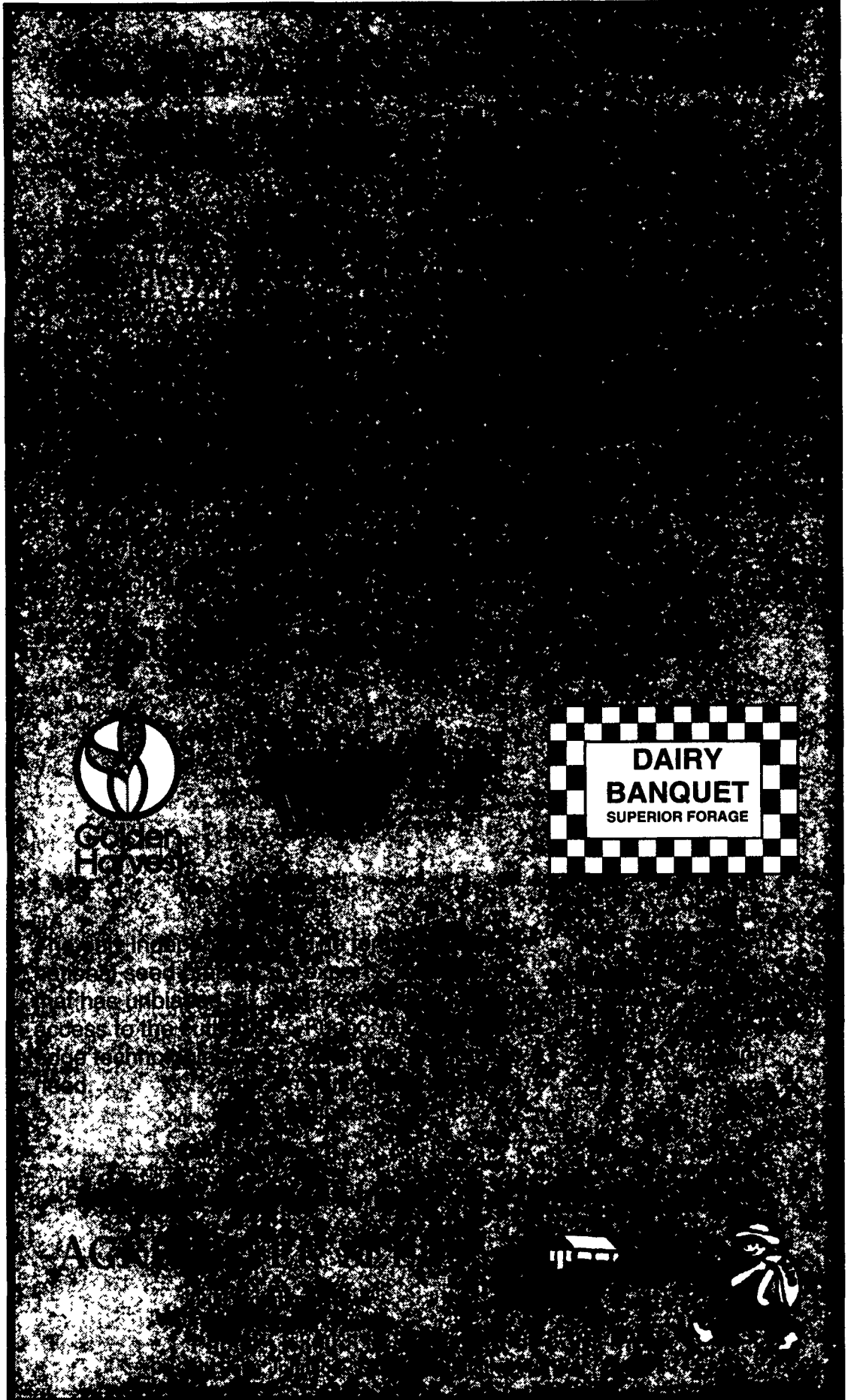
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