

CHOICES:
Better Ways of Growing Plants and Caring for Customers
Carl Whitcomb PhD, Lacebark Inc. Stillwater, OK

We make *choices* every day. *Choices* of foods, what to wear, how to respond to a caller, and on and on. There are also lots of *choices* in the nursery business. *Choices* as to what plants to grow are greatly influenced by the demands of customers. But most of your customers only see the plant top. A high percentage of your customers are unaware that *choices* you made as to how your plants are grown have a profound immediate effect on how fast plants establish in the landscape and long-term, how well they become anchored and future health and performance. But times are changing, and customers are tired of the same old deformed, congested, poor performing root systems. Customers are making the distinct *choice* for plants with superior root systems that thrive.

Most nurseries continue to make the specific *choice* to grow in the cheapest, smooth-walled conventional container they can find and use the cheapest mix components. The *choice* is actively made to grow in the cheapest way that produces a plant with a top that customers will accept. *Choices* have been made in terms of providing customers what they *think* they are buying – a plant with a good root system that will establish and grow, when, in fact, they are getting an inferior, cheap alternative. Few in the nursery industry and few of their customers realize that a major problem with growing plants in smooth walled containers is the *fact* that a plant with an acceptable top can be grown with a lousy, deformed, circling root system. As long as the plant is in a container and with a mix of at least minimal quality and is watered and fertilized regularly, top growth progresses reasonably well. Repercussions of *choices* made that created the terrible root system do not appear until the plant is installed in the landscape. Still, the defective root system may not be known for one, three, five years or more. And even then, unless an autopsy of the root system is done by someone knowledgeable, *choices* made by the production nursery responsible for the problem remain obscured.

One of the most notable pieces of *fiction* put forth by wholesale nurseries to retailers and landscapers and routinely passed on to customers is, “slice the root ball a few times before planting and that will take care of any circling roots!” Cutting the outside of the root ball provides few or no benefits. This has been documented by research again and again (Ch. 5, Establishment and Maintenance of Landscape Plants II). The nursery that produced the plant made an active *choice* to put the monkey on the back of the customer instead of taking responsibility and making the *choice* to grow the plant with a fibrous, non-circling root system, thereby insuring performance and longevity.

Concern about circling and deformed roots is not new. In 1889 a USA patent [19,406] was issued for a container design to stop root circling. Molding clay pots using this flawed design provided no benefits. What looks like an effective design on paper and what works are two distinctly different things. RootMaker® containers (USA Patents 4,753,037 – 4,939,865 – 5,557,886 and patents pending) are the result of years of research and they work. They stop root circling and stimulate root branching at all stages from seed germination to large specimen trees. Increased root branching increases efficiency of water and nutrient absorption. Plus, as roots branch, they explore more of the container volume and avoid the problem of circling and being jammed against the sidewall. RootMaker® containers are the *choice* of nurseries who are looking to the future and concerned about plant performance for their customers. Make the *choice*; go to www.rootmaker.com or call 256-882-3199 for more information.