



Highlights: Garden Centers

Whether you have acres to landscape or need a few plants to improve your home's curb appeal, you'll want to find a garden center that offers a wide variety of healthy plants, has an informed staff, and reasonable prices. **Chicago Consumers' Checkbook** (Checkbook.org) examined local garden centers and has the dirt on which ones deliver the above and more. Highlights from Checkbook's report include:

- Some garden centers in Checkbook's survey were rated "superior" for "overall quality" by at least 80 percent of their customers. Others received such favorable ratings from 30 percent or fewer.
- For specific plants, Checkbook's shoppers found enormous nursery-to-nursery price differences. For example, for a lavender in a six-inch pot, prices ranged from \$5.99 to \$19.99; and for a boxwood in a #3 container, prices ranged from \$23.99 to \$69.95.
- The big chains—Home Depot, Lowe's, and Menards—scored, on average, lower for quality than almost all independent stores. But these three chains did very well on price. Home Depot's prices averaged 34 percent below the all-store average for comparable items, Lowe's averaged 27 percent below the all-store average, and Menards' 24 percent lower.
- With garden centers, unlike most types of services and stores Checkbook examines, paying more for plants does slightly improve your odds of getting better advice, service, and product quality. Many of the nurseries rated highest for quality have higher-than-average prices. But some centers rated high for quality also have below-average prices.

Shopping advice

- Make a plan. Consider your yard's soil type and acidity, drainage patterns, and sunlight exposure. Think about how your property will look right away, and after years of growth. Make a rough drawing of your yard's layout and seek advice online and from friends and experts.
- When shopping for plants, check roots to be sure they have not dried out. You can touch to check for moisture and look through the drain holes of a container to make sure the roots are not brown.
- Avoid plants that have been placed on hot pavement and keep in mind that many types of plants, such as broadleaf evergreens, should be protected from continual direct sunlight.
- Check shrubs and trees to be sure branches are not weak or declining, that bark does not have scars or holes, that pruning cuts are flush with the branch or trunk, and that there is not dead wood.
- Check plants for signs of disease, such as browned or grayed areas or spots on leaves or stems.
- Check for insects.
- In growing season, be sure there is new growth.
- Get a receipt that shows the common and the Latin names of plants and the size, number purchased, date of purchase, price, and guarantee. Garden centers offer good guarantees when they believe their plants are healthy and are willing to compensate you when they aren't.
- Ask for instructions on how to plant—how much sun exposure is appropriate, what degree of drainage is recommended, how big a hole, how deep to plant, what to put in the planting hole, and what staking is recommended, if any. Also find out what pruning, feeding, and spraying is needed.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.