

Smaller is better

Small plant material transplants more successfully than large material. Smaller plants suffer less transplant shock than larger material, so they are less vulnerable to insects and disease. The smaller a plant, the more quickly it adapts to site conditions, no longer needs irrigation, and becomes established. One way to think of it is that the largest plant size you choose should be governed by your irrigation capabilities.

Smaller plants are easier to handle and *cost less!* They also have the capability to outgrow larger plants at the same site; within a few years, the plants that came from onegallon containers are likely to be *larger* than the plants that came from 5-gallon containers or B&B stock. Go as small as you can. (But can they be too small? Read on.)

Large enough to compete

If you are not mulching or putting protectors on your plants, then consider how big they need to be to survive weed competition. It may be important that they are tall enough to poke up above the surrounding vegetation or, if monitoring or maintenance will occur, that they can be re-located without being accidentally trampled or mowed.

If you choose larger material for these reasons, remember that you are looking at higher costs for materials and irrigation. It still may be better to buy smaller material and use the money saved to treat the plants with mulch, flagging, and/or tree protectors.

Top and root growth balanced

No matter what size plant you choose, it is important that the top growth and root growth are balanced. Fabulous top growth will not be able to support itself any time soon if it isn't attached to a good-sized, healthy root system.

It takes experience to know if the roots and shoots are balanced; there are standards that can help (American Standard for Nursery Stock), but they are not always a good fit for native plants. Generally, you want top growth that is equal or greater in mass to the root mass, but not more than three or four times its size. Top growth larger than that, and you are probably looking at a plant that was excessively watered and/or fertilized; this growth will be very difficult to support unless regular irrigation and fertilization continue.