Just because plant names are similar doesn't mean they can be substitutes for each other. But sometimes, the specified plant isn't available and you have to find an alternative.

By DANIEL WEISS

A rose is a rose

or is it?

Juliet asked Romeo, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell so sweet." That question is one that also applies to plants. We understand names based on what the object is and conversely, what it isn't. By giving something a name, it becomes real and unique. Juliet couldn't marry Romeo because she was a Capulet and Romeo was a Montague. What power names have!

Names of plants go even further, for they are self descriptive. *Amelanchier canadensis* indicates the plant originates in the Canadian shield area. 'Alba' is white and 'alternifolia' means alternate leafed foliage. More about names later.

Smart substitutions

To protect your contracting and landscape installation operation, write a plant substitution policy. This would come into effect in several important instances:

▶ when the plant is unavailable and not likely to be so during the installation;

▶ if available plants do not look their best; or

▶ later, after the project is completed and a plant dies. (If that happens, you should already have a warranty policy that covers you.)

It's important to explain your substitution policy to the customer for several reasons. One plant might be recommended at the installation stage over the originally designed plant because you want the best material to be installed — the healthiest looking plants that fulfill the design intent. Customers will be much more appreciative that you want to install an *Erica* x *darylensis* rather that a *Calluna vulgaris* because one was better looking than the other.

And the plant must be available. Many plants have a short, single digging season that extinguishes nursery stock, so when the job is finally sold, the 10- to 12-ft. multistem *Cornus florida* or *Trilum grandiflora* can only be seen in a magazine or catalog (perhaps the same one your client showed you originally).

In the same way, the time of year when you finally start the job may alter your feelings about using certain plants. Through experience of knowing what is normally available in nursery stock, planting in your particular microzone, local winter hardiness factors and other elements, you may opt not to plant a *Quercus palustris* or *Tsuga canadensis* in late September.

Answer your customer's questions

More than likely, we can always find a new plant, but the problem occurs with the clients. Will they go for it? Do they feel comfortable with the change?

One way to reduce the problem from the start is to present your substitution policy and come to a mutual understanding with the customer. But first, you need to define "a different plant" in clear terms the customer can understand.

Both viburnums are of the fragrant variety, but the V. judii (right) has a different habit than the V. burkwood (top). Both are beautiful in spring and fall, but the V. judii is rounded and the burkwood grows upright. Same or different?

There is a difference between a *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Wiltonii' and *J. horizontalis* 'Bar Harbor,' but what is the real difference between them? They both are spreading junipers, and in some cases, that may be all that is required to satisfy a landscape materials list. An example like this allows greater flexibility for plant availability at installation.

Is there a need to specify azalea 'Hot Shot' or 'Stewartsonian' or simply, "red azalea?" What I am suggesting is that in some cases, this generality may be acceptable. Certainly, if the design calls for *Caryopteris* x *clandonensis*, the difference between Kew Blue and Blue Mist may be negligible. It may be (in general and real terms) the same plant. Is this really a substitution?

Look at the plant's role

In the range of plant types from *transition* to *screen* to *accent* plant, certain types of plants are easier to change with other

plants and your customers may not mind it at all, as long as the function, quantity, size and cost remain equal. Often, there are many plants that would work instead of the originally designed one. The customers may not notice in some cases or they may say they don't care, as long as certain requirements are met. Other customers care very much.

Take a closer look at the differences in an evergreen shrub. The difference between a *Taxus* x *media* 'Vermeulen' may be inconsequential to a *Taxus* x *media* 'Hicksii.' Both are evergreen, have a similar habit and site needs, share the same genus and species designation and fulfill (for the most part) the same role. A customer with

◀ All these are spreading junipers. There is a 'Broadmoor,' 'Buffalo' and a 'Blue Rug.' Are they the same plants or different ones?

this knowledge during the design phase and negotiations will feel comfortable and believe they are getting good value. The name is not only similar, but their presence in space is almost equal. In this case, the names of two items are as similar as they are. That job may have called only for an upright yew.

Or the client walks the property and asks why a 'Hicksii' is on her property and not a 'Vermeulen.' It is an easy enough question and you had the best of intentions, but now they noticed they have a different plant. If you have a negotiated substitution policy, it will eliminate difficulties like this completely. With that in mind, the pressure is back upon you as the installing contractor.

The horizontal juniper at left has the same monetary value as the Little Princess spirea at right. Do they both fit in each other's spot in the garden?

Respecting the design

My second point returns to plant names and the design principles. The central element of the installation, the intent of the design and the function of the plant within the design must remain intact. Size, habit, color, site adaptability, physiological needs and texture must all come back into focus.

These elements were taken into consideration in the design, so they should be dealt with and understood at installation. The Taxus substitutions were simple, but try to change two Viburnum types, a *V. carlesii* for a *V. burkwoodii*. The *V. carlesii* will have spring flowers, scarlet fall color, maybe even a black berry, but with a round shape. The *V. burkwoodii* is similar, except it is upright; has less fragrance; grows smaller, glossier and serrated leaves; and perhaps is not as dense.

Although they have similar names and look on an inventory, these plants have more differences under tougher scrutiny. Does it matter to the design and the plants around it that the texture changes from a broad, simple, entire leaf margin plant to one with a deep, glossy leaf? What about bloom time? Does it disrupt the flow of blooms relative to the other parts of the property? A *V. carlesii* for a *V. opulus* or *lantana*? How far will you go?

Don't go too far

What I am proposing is that there is a range of plants that can be used as substitutes, including:

- those that are similar in name and presence;
- those that are similar in name and not in presence; and
- those that are obviously not the same plant at all or whose substitution will dramatically alter its function and relative position in the landscape.

Juniper for spiraea?

As an example of how substitutions affect the design idea, the plant function we have before us is to fill the space, where a spreading Juniper would work or also a type of Spiraea. Is that a huge change? Not really, for both occupy that filler or transition aspect of the landscape. The substitution matters much more in the effect that each plant makes within the landscape.

Value and quantity are easy to justify, but design function must be reconciled. For example, a spreading juniper may create a fine (receding from view) textured line, moving the eye from one section of plantings to another, and allowing the centrally planted *Prunus serrulata* to be the focal point of that section of planting.

A *Spiraea* x *bumalda* 'Goldflame' might fulfill cost and quantity requirements, but the mounded plant (which becomes raggy over time) fills up our view and takes away focus from our *Prunus*. This example may be an extreme, but we could probably fill pages of similar substitutions that may or may not be acceptable to the plant function within the landscape.

What is the relationship between a plant and its name? The plant and the name of the plant can be arbitrary. If a "dense" yew is trimmed like an upright yew, does it become an upright yew? A name solidifies certain images and focuses on what something is, and this concept applies in plants whose names tell exactly what they are (or rather, what we designate they should be).

The subtle difference in a name may not explain a whole history of production, origin and functional use in the landscape. Nor does it explain the policies the green industry needs to make distinctions easier when theory is the farthest thing from our minds. **LM**