

# GO TO THE SOURCE

**Planning and partners ease plant material sourcing frustrations.**

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

A trusted supplier can select plants for you, per your specifications.

**Y**OU'VE JUST sent out a bid for all the plants on a big residential landscape. The bid comes back, you tell the designer everything is set and place the order ... only to find the size you specified isn't actually available. Back to the phone you go.

While buying live goods that can sometimes take years to grow is never going to be as easy as picking up a carton of milk, there are ways to make the process go more smoothly.

#### **Communicate with all involved**

Jim Reddington has been a buyer at LP Statile, a re-wholesaler in Springfield, NJ,

for 27 years. He has seen what causes bottlenecks and misfires in the plant sourcing pipeline.

"The biggest thing is when a contractor comes in with a plan for a job that was designed by an outside architect, and the material specified is not available in that variety or size," he says. "Landscape contractors are often reluctant to communicate with the architect to make changes."

Reddington says quite often the architect is not familiar with the local market and availability of the plant material. Also, there is usually some lag time between the design and installation, during which

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the material becomes unavailable.

"In the case of a job designed by an outside architect, get communication going with them to find out what they're open to in terms of substitutions," he says. "A lot of times contractors feel bound to the design and maybe the architect is completely open to substitutions."

The same advice holds true for landscapers who deal directly with homeowners. Giving them several options upfront depending on availability can avert disappointment down the road.

"When I first started doing this, I was more flexible with substitutions," says Cecily Gordon, an estimator at New Canaan Landscaping in San Jose, CA. The company focuses on high-end residential landscapes. "Now I am true to my list. If there are problems where something is unavailable or needs substitutions, I give notice to the architect. Sometimes they don't care and roll right with it, and sometimes you find out the client had their heart set on this specific plant or tree."

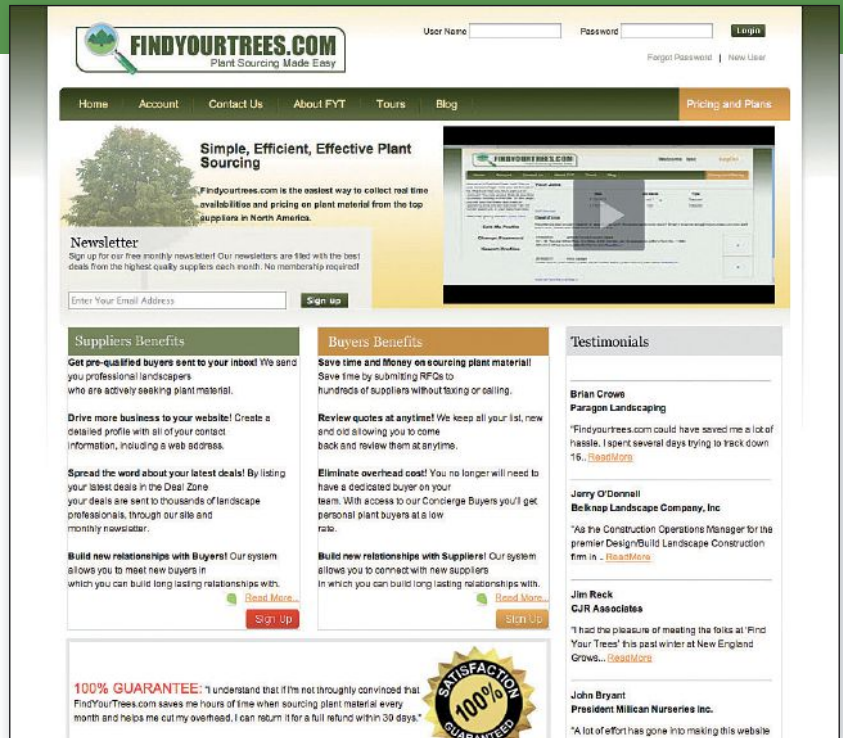
### Build relationships

The landscape industry needs each other. Landscape architects need contractors, contractors need wholesalers, and wholesalers need growers. The right relationships are critical to business, but oftentimes there is a disconnect among the many moving parts of the landscape supply chain.

Colby Jordan, founder of findyourtrees.com, says he saw that disconnect when his father ran into plant sourcing issues and Jordan, still in his 20s, couldn't believe he was not able to find plants online. After a year of testing, Jordan launched his plant sourcing site a year ago.

While some may think of intermediate sites as being efficient but impersonal, Jordan sees it as a networking tool.

"I see our tool as building relationships between buyers and suppliers," he



says. "We're getting people to respond to each other and making sure everyone's introduced."

Gordon also stresses the importance of building relationships.

"I am working with growers and nurseries who know me and know the company," she says. "They know the quality we demand and I know what they provide. There's a significant amount of energy saved knowing I can trust our partners to provide what we expect. It's worth the time building that relationship upfront."

Once trust is built, she says suppliers are often able to provide photos of their stock with size and quality specifications — saving the landscape company from hand picking many of its orders.

### Have a plan

Upfront organization also pays off exponentially when sourcing plants.

Gordon enters all the bid information she receives in a template to record the plants, sizing and source.

"Many times, we bid a project and

Findyourtrees.com has partnered with industry associations to offer discounts on its plant sourcing services.

then six months or a year later you need to find it," she says. "It's important to create a system that others can step in and use. Creating that type of system will save time over the long haul."

It also helps to plan orders in advance. But that's easier said than done.

"The bulk of our customers are walk-ins," says Reddington. "They come in and purchase that day. But it does help to pre-order, even if it's just a day or two. That allows us to assemble the order in the yard to make it easier to pick up."

Planning is especially important for hard-to-source items, such as large specialty trees, native plants and bulbs — anything that is out of the ordinary.

Gordon says native plantings are a good example. Designers may specify a native meadow with thousands of plugs

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that have to be grown under contract, and that could take months for them to mature to the proper size.

“Deal with the trouble spots first and get those conversations going as soon as possible,” Gordon says.

Advanced planning also helps with shipping considerations. Specialty plants and trees often can’t be ordered in small quantities. If they’re being shipped across the country, they need to fill up the truck.

Gordon’s planning starts before she places an order. Because there is often significant time between the landscape design and the actual bid — and changes may have occurred that will impact the plant list — she checks the plans.

“I have to do some research on the lists,” she says. “I confirm the legend matches the planting plan. Often the legend is made during the first round of the process and can change dramatically when the planting plan is made. Also, sometimes landscape architects will source a plant that they don’t know about — it might come from England, for example — then we have to get into quarantine research and shipping costs to see if it’s viable.”

### Keep your options open

With the variables specific to live goods, such as size, variety, season and condition, it’s important to have as many sources as possible. Most landscapers have their “go-to” suppliers, but it’s wise to have backup.

“What we’ve been finding is that most contractors have good relationships with a few local suppliers, but sometimes architects specify a particular plant that is not available in large quantities in an area,” says Jordan. “Inventories are constantly changing, so you have to start shopping around. That’s when time gets drained.”

Online brokers like Jordan and re-wholesalers like Reddington provide another avenue to plant sourcing.



Reddington buys stock from nurseries across the country and brings it into a central location. Jordan’s findyourtrees.com enables landscapers to submit a list of plants through the site, which is automatically sent to different nurseries to bid on.

“The beauty of brokers is you can find everything in one place,” Gordon says. “It can be expensive, but sometimes it’s worth the money.”

Gordon says New Canaan’s normal approach to sourcing begins with growers or wholesale nurseries. Sometimes branded plants are needed from retail nurseries, and sometimes they go online to source specialty plants.

### Use today’s technology

The Internet and digital photography has changed the way plants are sourced, but change has come slowly.

“I think with this industry, they’re not as tech savvy as some others,” says

Re-wholesalers constantly bring in new plants and trees so they can provide one-stop shopping for landscapers.

Jordan. “That’s a challenge we face. Landscapers are kind of nervous about tying out a technology-based product. We spent a year working with landscapers to make our service simple to use.”

Reddington says his company’s site is used as a source for plant availability information, and LP Statile implemented an email sourcing and availability program last year that has become popular.

Still, it’s not an Amazon.com model. “The product we’re selling is not a manufactured item that can be duplicated,” says Reddington. “Sometimes we can’t just special order it. These products might take five or six years to produce. We can’t pay more money to get them to grow quicker. Sometimes the customer just doesn’t understand that.” **LM**



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