



**Issue:** Florida Grades and Standards for Nursery Plants and Trees

**Position:** FNGLA embraces the use of the *Florida Grades and Standards for Nursery Plants* to help ensure high quality trees with good structure and greater longevity are used in Florida landscapes. Use of the Grades and Standards must be accompanied with the understanding that applying terms and standards to live trees is a subjective process, application must be practical and reasonable, and training or knowledge of tree biology, maintenance and production practices is needed. Trees should be graded based on any updated Grades and Standards as published by the Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services' Division of Plant Industry (DPI). Any specifications beyond the Grades and Standards must be communicated to all parties in written form prior to delivery of the trees and plants.

**Background:** Florida tree nurseries have experienced significant changes in production demands during the last decade. One of these major positive factors was the 1998 publication of the 2nd edition of the *Florida Grades and Standards for Nursery Plants*. Its impetus was to improve communication between buyers and sellers on what constitutes tree quality. Due to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition's popularity and acceptance among landscape architects and municipalities, the Grades and Standards have become the universal tree specification throughout Florida. This has led to a significant increase in the quality of trees produced by Florida nurseries.

One of the greatest benefits to the Grades and Standards is the nursery and landscape industry now enjoys universal specification and shares common terminology. This common terminology has proven to be a tremendous benefit since it now fosters better communication between buyers and sellers and offers confidence when discussing similar products and their quality. Nonetheless this benefit of common terminology or a "tree glossary" can sometimes become a disadvantage because words and illustrations are used to describe a living tree which inherently may cause some subjectivity. The challenge facing the nursery and landscape industry is communicating and clarifying the subjective aspects of the Grades and Standards. Education and training will make grading less subjective, which, in turn, results in consistency of grading from job to job. This grading consistency only happens when buyers and sellers embrace a working knowledge of the Grades and Standards.

While the Grades and Standards have increased tree quality, it has also sometimes led to unrealistic and unwritten expectations. For example, a buyer might specify Florida #1 trees expecting such to have near perfect straight trunks to the top of the trees. This is a misapplication of the Grades and Standards. In some cases, buyers or inspectors have added requirements that are not found in the Grades and Standards and not written in the planting plans or other bid documents. The addition of such nonexistent criteria leads to confusion at job sites as well as great expense to the growers and landscape contractors when such trees are rejected erroneously. Proper use of the Grades and Standards must be employed to ensure it continues to function as a beneficial communication tool and as a means for ensuring plant and tree quality. If ad hoc criteria are imposed on the Grades and Standards beyond its scope, then the universal specification now benefitting buyers and sellers alike will be jeopardized. This could lead to a fragmented understanding of tree quality where each locality or area has differing understandings and erroneous definitions, resulting in exactly the opposite intent of the objectives of the Grades and Standards 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

Buyers and sellers must work together to recognize it is possible to grow, buy, install and maintain great trees and plants for Florida's landscapes and urban forests. Buyers' expectations for high quality trees have increased dramatically over the past decade. The industry must embrace these quality gains, while realizing continuous unwritten practices and changes to the Grades and Standards create a difficult, if not impossible, marketplace for buying and selling plants and trees.