Plants don’t live forever

A New Yorker cartoon shows a lady shopping a garden center bench for plants. She has three choices at three price points: annuals, $6; perennials, $10; eternals, $749.95.

No matter what the cost, plants don’t live forever. And if they did, what would they cost? They’d probably cost more than $749.95. Even though we know plants don’t live forever, still, we don’t want a plant that we purchased, planted and cared for to die.

All too often, I find myself in the position of reminding a person of this fact of life – plants don’t live forever.

There are extremes, though. The oldest tree on record is Methuselah, a 4,772-year-old bristlecone pine in central California. Offspring of Methuselah, cultivated in the 1970s, all died because they were sent to low-altitude locations. The tree’s secret location in the White Mountains is two miles above sea level.

Even though the bristlecone pine is designed to live thousands of years, misplaced (planted at too low an altitude) results in the tree living only a fraction of its potential life. The point is to plant the right plant in the right place. Make sure the plant is well suited for Florida… that wet site, that dry site, that salty site, that high pH site, that shady site, that sunny site, etc.

The second point is to have realistic expectations based on the plant species. Some plants are designed to live longer than others. This is true even with trees. For example: One of our longest-lived trees in Florida is the live oak. There are live oak trees in Florida that are hundreds of years old. But you would not expect a silver maple to make it that long. It’s a shorter-lived species. In Florida, a thirty-year-old silver maple is probably in a state of decline due to old age.

The third point is to learn how to correctly maintain the plants you have. For example, many people over fertilize their centipedegrass lawns. As a result, they cause their lawns to go into a state of decline and to live a much shorter life.

As stated so eloquently in Psalms Chapter 103 Verses 15 and 16, “As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”

Plant the right plant in the right place, learn what it likes and provide it and when the plant reaches the end of its life, replace it.

Many homeowners spend more than $749.95 attempting to turn a short-lived plant into an eternal plant.

Larry Williams
Extension Agent, Horticulture
October 3, 2006