

MAKING THE WISEST BAREROOT CHOICES



By acting now, the smart nursery shopper can save money and get plants off to a great start

BARE-ROOT TIME is here, but only fleetingly in warm climates. Shop early for the best pick of vines, roses, shrubs, and ornamental, shade, and fruit trees.

Often 40 to 70 percent cheaper than their container-grown counterparts, bare-root plants also adapt better to existing soils and develop healthier root systems. You don't have to worry about potbound or girdled roots, or about matching container soil to garden soil.

CHOOSE CAREFULLY

Bare-root season is short because trees are dug and shipped while dormant. Buy early while stock is fresh. Two risky bets to avoid near the end of the bare-root season are plants leafing out (no longer dormant, they may not transplant well) and those prepackaged in plastic (their roots often start to rot).

Check roots carefully; they should be plentiful and well formed (not 4- to 6-inch stubs), feel firm, and not look dry. Avoid plants with dark, slimy, or spongy roots. (If only one or two small end sections appear this way, they can be trimmed off without affecting the plant's health.)

Next, check the trunk. It should be clean of wounds and fairly straight without any strange twists.

PLANTING AND PRUNING

The primary cause of failure with bare-root plants is drying out. Bring your purchase straight home, and don't let it bake in the sun or suffer from drying wind.

If you can't plant right away, bare-root stock can hold for several days. Soak roots in water for an hour, then place plant in a shady, cool spot. To keep roots from drying out, lay the plant down and cover roots with moist compost or sawdust.

Before planting, inspect roots again and trim off any broken, dry, or diseased portions with sharp pruners. Broken roots can rot, but cleanly cut ones will heal and grow.

To plant, loosen soil within an area at least twice the diameter of the rootball, and as deep as needed to accommodate roots (usually 12 to 18 inches). Add a complete controlled-release fertilizer to the planting area.

Hold the plant upright as you fill the hole. In average or heavy soil, keep the plant's old soil line 1 to 2 inches above the final soil level; in loose, sandy soil, set it at the ground's soil level. Set stakes if needed; tie when planting is complete. Fill the hole halfway, gently shake the plant up and down to let soil sift down, then tamp lightly with your foot and fill the hole. Water slowly and thoroughly to soak soil all the way down.

Some nurseries pot their bare-root plants in paper-pulp pots. After slicing pot sides and bottom into quarters to help the container break down, plant in the ground, pot and all. Tear off any part of the pot rim above soil level to avoid wicking action that sucks up soil moisture.

After initial watering, check soil moisture regularly and water as needed. Don't overwater: dormant plants need less water than actively growing ones, and their roots develop poorly in soggy soil.

At planting time, prune only branches that are broken, that rub together, or that detract from the overall structure. For most fruit trees, encourage low branching by cutting the trunk back to 3 to 4 feet. (Fruit trees grafted with multiple varieties should be pruned selectively; ask your nursery for pointers.)