

Planting Bare Root Plants

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Cold, wet weather makes us reluctant to consider gardening, but actually now is an excellent time of year to plant and transplant. Many perennial vegetables and fruits are sold bare root meaning the plant has had all the soil washed gently off its roots, is packed in damp sawdust and boxed or bagged. Bare root is usually more economical, because it costs nurseries less to raise and ship. Food plants such as strawberries, cane berries, blueberries, fruit trees, rhubarb, and asparagus, ornamental plants like roses and lilacs, and native trees and shrubs for landscape reclamation are almost always bare root.

If you cannot plant immediately, then the best practice is to “heal in,” i.e. cover the roots of the plants in a mound of soil, water them and let them be until planting time. They can stay heeled in for quite a while, but as the weather warms up they will begin to grow and the longer you wait the harder it will be to successfully move them into their permanent spots.

Examine your new plants; cleanly cut back any damaged (broken or mushy) roots. Soak the plants in a bucket of water for one to two hours. Dig a hole wider but not deeper than the root system. Put the plant in the hole at the level where it was growing at the nursery; you can put a cone of soil under it for support. Spread the roots out. Especially with woody plants, backfill the hole with native, not amended, soil. Research shows that roots tend to grow well in the amended soil but virtually stop when they reach the native soil. This makes trees and shrubs vulnerable to drought and wind, and negatively affects size and fruit yields. You can mix a slow release fertilizer with the backfill soil. Always follow manufacturer recommendations for appropriate amounts. More is not better! Tamp down the soil to remove air pockets, and water thoroughly.

Since bare-root plants are dormant, they usually survive transplantation very well. Those sad little sticks will burst into leaf with the spring!