

# Baring all this winter !

As winter greets us we instantly think of open fires, slow cooked casseroles, grey skies and staying indoors. In a gardeners mind we think of the perfect weather for major tasks - cool and still, ideal for warming yourself up with plenty of planting, pruning and pottering - all in anticipation of the spring explosion !

My mind turns to bare-rooted plants, whether they are fruit trees, roses or ornamentals. With autumn behind us many of our trees have lost their leaves and have entered their dormant season. Photosynthesis on deciduous plants has halted, thereby making transplanting a much safer and inexpensive option.

Bare-rooted simply means plants that are grown in fields and dug up when dormant (winter) and sold without soil or pots. Digging bare- root stock for sale is a major operation for growers with specially designed tractors that undercut roots below and beside. Plants are bundled and labeled as to variety and shipped to nurseries where they are 'healed-in' (placed into moist wood-shavings or loose soil). This efficient method of supplying quality plants, together with low freight weight and a minimum of labor, means retailers can provide bare- rooted plants substantially cheaper than potted plants that are available year round.

Bare-rooted plants are available only in winter. Once spring arrives it is too late because they start to shoot both above and below ground making transplanting a problem. Don't be put off by the look of bare-rooted plants. In most cases they are literally a stick (as shown in pictures), however treated correctly they will reward you for years to come. Fruit trees, ornamental trees, flowering shrubs, roses, grapes, berries, asparagus, and strawberries are plants available in 'bare root'.



*Planting to the correct depth is important*



*'Evelyn' rose in full bloom*



*Bare-rooted root system*

Some points to remember when selecting bare rooted plants:-

- Try to ensure there is no obvious physical damage and look for a good, even branch structure. If it's grafted, or budded, watch for any growth emerging from the base and remove it because that's the root stock reappearing. Prune out any broken roots, as clean cuts heal faster than ragged edges.
- Remember the roots of these plants need to stay moist from the point when they're dug out of the ground to planting time.

- Try and plant the tree as soon as you get home and don't leave it lying in the sun or wind while you are preparing to plant. Dig a hole with a good, wide diameter but not a lot of depth, because you want to plant the tree at the same level as when it was originally in the ground. Look closely at the base of the stem and watch for a slight change in colour – that was its original ground level.
- As a general guide, ensure the bud or graft is about 10cm above the ground. Spread the roots out in a natural position. Sometimes it helps to mound a pile of soil at the base to help support the root system. Then backfill, wiggle the tree as you go, and add water to remove any air pockets.
- Don't fertilise until the tree starts growing in spring as this can 'burn' the roots.
- Prune the branches so they are in balance with the root system. Cut branches to about 30cm from the main trunk, and to a bud. Then to encourage a nice branching habit, remove the leader and then loosely stake the tree until established.
- Water the tree once or twice a week until December. Using a bucket is a good way of making sure an adequate quantity of water is applied. Make sure the water penetrates to the root zone.
- Mulch of course, however not right up to the trunk, as this can induce collar rot.

With so many fantastic varieties of bare-rooted plants available, there is no excuse not to get planting. Be sure to visit your nursery soon as bare-rooted stock disappears quickly, or better still, place an order to take advantage of the affordable prices.

So get active and outside, you might surprise yourself how mild our winters have become and how enjoyable it is to be outdoors in winter. The days we do get rain, curl up with your favourite gardening book for inspiration and quiet indulgence!

Happy gardening ... Helen

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