

WHY PLANT BARE ROOT?

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January is the perfect time to get out in the garden and plant bare-root stock. The UCCE Master Gardener column last week touched a bit on this subject, but new gardeners especially may not understand the benefits of bare-root planting. All of the local nurseries are flush with a good variety of deciduous fruit, shade and ornamental trees and shrubs, as well as vines, and nursery personnel are more than willing to help gardeners choose what to plant now. If a backyard orchard is being planned, planting bare-root stock is the preferred method of planting fruit-bearing trees.

First, why would a gardener want to plant something that has its roots exposed? Bare-root plants are normally much less expensive than container-grown plants. In addition, if they are handled and planted properly, bare-root plants grow just as well as those grown in containers. Another added benefit is that the roots on these plants are easier to inspect for damage or disease. However, because the roots are bare, they dry out very quickly and it is important to get these plants in the ground as soon as possible after buying. Therefore, select the planting site before going shopping and get the hole dug beforehand.

At nurseries, bare-root plants are usually stored in bins with moist sawdust or peat covering the roots to keep them from drying out. Sometimes you will also see plastic wrap around the sawdust-covered roots; take this off before planting. However, if the plant is not going in the ground for a day or two, place it in a bucket of water just covering the roots.

Bare-root plants do better when planted on a mound or in raised beds because it reduces root and crown rots; they should never be planted in saturated soil or low in a basin. Dig a hole that is two times the width of the plant and a little deeper than where you see the soil level mark on the trunk (this will be a darker color). This extra depth will allow a mound of soil to be built on which the roots will be placed and spread out evenly. Remember, the most fragile part of a tree or shrub is the crown – the transitional section where the trunk joins the roots – and it should never have water puddling against it. Planting a little high or on a mound prevents this and also allows for some soil settling.

Bare-root fruit trees and many roses and vines such as grapes are referred to as "rootstocks" – a term that may be confusing. Certain trees, vines and shrubs have desirable fruits or ornamental qualities, but their root systems are less than desirable. Other varieties of the same species may have more desirable root systems that resist certain soil-borne pests, fungi or viral pathogens or just may be able to withstand unfavorable soil conditions better (drought, high salinity, etc.). When the better scion (the upper portion of a tree or shrub) is grafted onto the better roots (the rootstock), a more vigorous plant develops. The area where the two are joined together is called the "graft" or "bud union" and this part of the trunk should never be below the soil surface.

Once you have a tree or shrub planted properly, water the area thoroughly, but do not build a basin during winter; this can wait until the hot, dry months of summer. Staking trees is not generally recommended, but if it is necessary because of high winds, make sure your tree can still sway a bit to aid in developing trunk strength, and remove the staking as soon as the tree can stand alone. In the case of fruit trees (and some ornamental trees), painting the lower trunk area with a half-and-half mixture of water and interior white latex paint reduces the risk of sunburn which in turn reduces the risk of borers getting into the wood.

El Dorado County's local nurseries are excellent sources for bare-root trees, vines and shrubs, and the personnel are always willing to answer questions. The U.C. Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners are also available to talk about bare-root planting and care; call their office at 530-621-5512 Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon. Another good reference for those wanting to plant fruit trees is "The Home Orchard" book which can be purchased in the main office at the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building, 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. This book contains in-depth information about growing deciduous fruit and nut trees, and includes subjects such as climate and soil requirements, varieties and rootstocks, planting and care of fruit trees, irrigation, fertilization, training and pruning, budding and grafting, fruit harvesting and pest and disease management methods.

The UCCE Master Gardeners are not holding a class this week, but on January 31 beginning at 9 a.m., there will be a free class on "Propagation for the Penny-Wise." It will be held in the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville, and hands-on demonstrations will be presented on how to start new plants from seed, cuttings and division.

Due to budget constraints and shortened office staff hours the UC Cooperative Extension and Master Gardener Office will be closed on Mondays until further notice. However, the University Program staff (Farm Advisor and Program Representatives) will continue to work a normal schedule and will be available to meet with clientele at the office by appointment or can be reached by dialing 530-621-5502.