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# GARDENING IN THE WINTER: TRY BARE ROOTS!!

Gay Wilhelm, Placer County Master Gardener

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About January or February, I'm staring out the window longing for a little gardening time. I'll put on my boots, coat and gloves but most of the garden is asleep after a fall cleanup.

Luckily, we live in a fairly moderate winter climate. Except for the higher elevations of Placer and Nevada Counties, gardeners can get a head start on spring with bare-root plantings. Winter months are an excellent time to visit nurseries for fruit and nut trees, berries and roses.

**Selection** of the bare-root plant is of the most importance. Trees do best with a trunk diameter of ½ to 5/8 inch. These trees will become established faster than smaller or larger sizes. Roses are sold by grade, No.1, 1 ½, and 2. One is the best quality decreasing down to 2. The prices usually correspond to the quality of the plant. Bare-root roses should have healthy, strong canes. Avoid dry or brittle canes. Look for bright green buds on the canes, but buds of an advanced stage will grow more slowly.

Roots should be symmetrically spaced around the trunk and light in color. Avoid plants with broken, kinked, knotted or diseased roots. Trees that have been grown in containers may have roots that have grown in a circle, called girdling. If so, try to spread out the roots otherwise the circling will continue and affect the health of the plant.

**Plant** the bare root as soon as possible. Good air circulation and at least 6 hours of sunlight are ideal. Never plant in saturated, wet soil. Roses need a hole at least 18 inches deep and as wide. A tree requires a hole twice as wide as the roots and only as deep as the root ball unless the soil is severely compacted.

Some areas have hardpan, an impervious layer below the soil surface 1 1/2 - 2 ft. down. Drainage of the new tree maybe compromised if this layer is not penetrated. A pick axe or other heavy equipment may be used. If not, a fruit tree may be planted in a raised bed 1-2 ft. with the caution not to saturate the soil in the root zone.

**Trees do not require additional soil amendments or fertilizer.** When digging the hole, well decomposed compost may be incorporated to the native soil.

Roses too can be planted with 1/3 organic material mixed with native soil. Care should be taken not to plant any bare-root too deep, berries especially. The crown of the plant should be 1-2 inches above the surrounding ground to prevent crown rot. The soil at the bottom of the hole should be mounded to support the plant and the downward growth of the roots. Gently fill in the hole, packing down the soil preventing any air pockets. The soil should slope down from the trunk.

After settling occurs, the uppermost root should be just below the soil surface. Gently firm the soil in place. Create a basin for planting the new tree or rose making sure the water drains away from the trunk. The water basin needs to be wider than the planting hole, this allows water to be applied to the entire root zone and encourage roots to grow beyond. **Water** the plant thoroughly after planting.

After admiring your hard work, stand back and decide if your new addition needs **pruning**. The ideal rose cane will have 3-5 buds and be only 6 inches long. Remove any small or weak canes leaving 3-5 healthy canes. Cut ¼ inch above a bud facing away from the center at a 45 degree angle sloping away from where the bud points.

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A fruit or nut tree may take a little more daring pruning than the roses. Most backyard gardeners want a small tree that they are able to pick the fruit without too much trouble. If this is your goal, cutting back the tree to 18- 24 inches will force the tree to develop low branches. The tree can be cut at 36 inches if access under the tree is important.

Most small diameter trees have few if any lateral branches. Larger trees can have the lateral branches removed unless the branches are well spaced. These branches can be cut back to 3 inches with 2 or 3 buds. These stubs will later form the scaffolding of the tree.

Bare roots are very satisfying. Not only did you get a little gardening time in during the winter, but now you can sit back in your cozy home and watch the miracle about to unfold out the window.

### References

*Fruit Trees: Planting and Care of Young Trees*; UC ANR Publication #8048. Available online at: <http://homeorchard.ucdavis.edu/8048.pdf>

*Selecting and Planting Bare Root Roses*, from UCCE Tulare-Kings County.

### Backyard Orchard Resources:

*The Home Orchard: Growing Your Own Deciduous Fruit and Nut Trees*, UC ANR Publication #3485. Available online to purchase here: <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu/LawnGarden/3485.aspx>

*A Guide to Home Orchard for the Sierra Nevada Foothills*, UCCE Placer-Nevada Publication #31-701. Available for purchase at our Auburn office.

### Growing Roses Resources:

*Healthy Roses: Environmentally Friendly Ways to Manage Pests and Disorders in Your Garden and Landscape*, UC ANR Publication # 21589. Available online for purchase here: <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu/ANRPub/21589.aspx>

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