

## Rose Care

### From Bare Root....To Bloom!

Consulting Rosarian Contact: [Jill Barnard](#)

It seems that many people are uneasy about planting bare root roses. The good news is that roses want to grow badly enough to overcome most deficiencies in technique. If you plant them 'green side up' and water until the worms wiggle, you're almost guaranteed success. A little insight into sensible methodology, however, will ensure a more vigorous and healthy bush.



There are various ways to buy bare root roses: through mail order sources, and either bagged or boxed from your nursery or garden center. When ordering by mail, request No. 1 grade plants. When buying locally you have the same choice - plants are marked No. 1, 1 1/2, or 2 and priced accordingly. Spend the extra bucks on the No. 1 and save on the anguish. From the #1 grades select one with a large bud union, three or more thumb-sized canes 12-15" long, and preferably with one or more new main canes starting to emerge from the bud union.

When you have your bare root rose home, take the plant out of whatever packing material it might be in. I recommend removing the box from a boxed rose, as well. Submerge the entire plant in a bucket of water to which a few tablespoons of a transplant solution such as Vitamin B-1 have been added. It should soak at least 12 hours to rehydrate the root system after several days or even weeks of exposure to less than perfect moisture conditions. If you are delayed in planting, it can soak for 3-4 days, but change the water daily to discourage bacterial growth. Meanwhile, dig the almighty hole....



**THE ALMIGHTY HOLE - 2' x 2' WIDE x 2' DEEP** The size of the hole seems like 'overkill', but it will pay off in spades in future performance. The hole in which you plant is the most important aspect of growing good roses from bare roots.

Depth is for drainage. Other than anchor roots which aren't the main nutrient suppliers, most roses grow only about 12 inches deep. However, they require lots of water and won't tolerate wet feet from lack of drainage. If you are confident you have loose, draining soil to a depth of 2 feet then you may dig to only 18 inches. If you aren't confident, fill the hole with water. If it takes more than an hour to drain, dig deeper to 24" and add a 4-5" layer of gravel.

Don't compromise on the width. You need to add organic amendments to lighten and enrich the entire growing area. A healthy bush, properly cared for, will develop feeder roots everywhere in a two foot radius and frequently beyond if the soil is light and friable.

**SOIL COMPOSITION** All soil contains minerals and soil organisms which are necessary to break down organic amendments and fertilizers, making them available to the plant roots. What some soil is lacking is 'organic' material. You must supply the necessary amendments such as compost, mulch or peat to make the final mixture 1/2 garden soil and 1/2 organic material. Well-aged manure may be added as a portion of the organic materials. Rabbit and chicken manures are higher in nitrogen than cow and steer manures. Whichever you choose, 'well-aged' is the key. The heat generated by fresh manure in the decomposition process can burn tender roots. When you have thoroughly mixed the amendments into the garden soil, refill the hole half way with the mixture. Then fill the hole with water and let it drain to settle the soil.

**ORGANICS AND AMENDMENTS** Sprinkle 1/2 C. superphosphate or bone meal around the bottom of the hole and mix lightly with loose soil. Phosphorus moves very slowly in soil and should be available at the bottom of the hole. To the remaining soil mix, add another 1/2 C. superphosphate or bone meal, 1 C. cottonseed meal and 1/2 C blood meal. This mixture will fill the top 10-12" of the hole, the area where the feeder roots will develop.



With the amended soil, make a cone-shaped mound tall enough to reach the top of the hole. The cone shape will support the natural downward and outward growth pattern of the roots allowing the plant to anchor itself well enough to support tall top growth.

**TRIM THE ROSE PLANT** Now comes the painful part of planting bare roots - trimming the roots and cutting back the canes. Trimming the roots is easy, lets start there. Cut off any broken roots just above the break, as the damaged tissue is a perfect harbor for disease. Then trim 1/2 inch off of each root end to stimulate new root development.

Now a look at the plant will tell you why you need to reduce the cane length to about 6-8" maximum. If the plant is to prosper, the roots must be able to gather enough water and nutrients to support the top growth. If the canes are twice the size of the roots, the roots can't produce adequately, and the top growth will be spindly. Coming out of cold storage equates to coming out of dormancy, and each bud eye will vigorously try to produce foliage and blooms. Therefore, you want to reduce the number of bud eyes, and give the roots a chance to develop along with the top.

Make your cuts 1/4" above a bud eye growing away from the center of the bush, at a 45-degree angle sloping away from the bud eye. If there any new shoots that have already started to grow along the portion of cane that remains, cut them off. They will be replaced. Each bud has 2 or 3 'eyes' as a natural defense against damage or frost. (Amazing, these creatures - they just want to

grow.)

**READY TO PLANT - FINALLY!** As in most aspects of gardening, preparation of the planting site utilizes more than half of the effort expended, but it will produce twice the results.

Place the newly-trimmed plant over the cone of soil, gently spreading the roots out over it. Position it so that the bud union is at the proper height, by pushing the plant down slowly on the cone, taking care not to break the roots.

Much discussion occurs among rose-growers as to the proper height to plant. Where winter temperatures are extreme (below 20 degrees F.) the bud union should be slightly below soil level to protect from freezing. In hot climates, protection from heat and sunburn dictates placing the bud union just at soil level. Moderate climates allow the bud union to be 1-2" above the soil surface.

Holding the plant in position, filter loose soil down around the roots. Begin filling in the rest of the hole, pressing the soil down firmly enough to avoid air pockets but not enough to compact the soil and damage the roots. When the hole is half filled, water with half of the soaking solution and let drain. Then fill the hole to soil level and form a water well around the plant of slightly larger diameter than the root system. Fill the water well with the remainder of the soaking solution.

**MOUND** light soil or mulch over the new plant to at least half its height and water it well, but don't water it away. This step is essential in keeping the young tissue moist and protecting it from dry, cold winds. For the next month, water the plant every three days. The planting soil should be kept on the wet side of moist, and the mounding soil moist, not soggy. Remember, those tiny roots can't reach out for water yet - it must be supplied directly to them. Stifle the urge to fertilize with rose food until after the first bloom. If you are overly maternal, you may add Superthrive to the water or even fish emulsion mixed at 1/3 strength, since these are organic products that won't burn the new roots.

When the top bud eyes have produced 2-inch shoots with leaflets its time to un mound. With a slow trickle of water or using **ONE** finger, not your big clumsy hand, carefully remove the mound from around the canes. Leave it slightly above the bud union for a while - weather and watering will do the rest. Some plants come out of dormancy slower than others, so have patience in watching for leaflets to appear. If the canes are still green and firm and not greyish and wrinkled, the plant is okay. Keep watering and wait. A little die-back is normal; if it progresses beyond an inch or so you may need to cut to the next bud eye, and water and wait some more.

While you wait for foliage and blooms to color your garden, place a 2-3" layer of mulch over the entire bed, covering the bud union, too. This protective layer will keep the surface feeder roots cool and moist, conserve moisture in hot weather, and keep weeds from gaining a foothold.

Garden aesthetics are greatly enhanced, as well.

Your bare root should bloom in 10-12 weeks, given the TLC above. Some rose books recommend snapping off rose buds to direct the youthful plant's energy to more root and foliage development. **WHEN TURKEYS FLY!** I certainly haven't the fortitude nor do I practice the self-denial that would be a requisite to eliminating the one thing that caused me to buy the plant in the first place!

By the time the new plant blooms, its roots should be developed enough for chemical rose foods. It will benefit more from liquids than granulars, because it is readily available to the roots. Feeding twice as often with 1/2 strength liquids will supply instant food on a steady basis.

On a first-year bush, blooms should be removed by cutting **SHORT** stems, leaving as much foliage as possible. "Cut for the bush" is the rule of thumb - wait 'til next year to cut long stems. The plant needs every leaf it has to manufacture food. And water, water, water. Roses like at least 2" per week - more in hot weather. Think of water as fertilizer . . . Without it, the plant can absorb nothing from the soil. The fertilizer you apply can't break down into a soluble form, and even the invisible soil organisms will be subdued in their all-important tasks.

. . . And since you took the time to prepare the 'Almighty Hole', you needn't worry about wet feet !

