

# Bare Root Planting of Trees and Shrubs

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## Consider plant, site before buying bare root trees, shrubs

With the spring growing season just around the corner, you may be thinking about adding a tree, shrub or vine to your landscape.

Now is the time to prepare, because bare root plants will soon be available, and the weather will be right for planting. To ensure success, there are several concerns to consider before you purchase a plant.

Will it grow well where you live in Skagit County? Fruit takes a lot of heat units to ripen in time to enjoy. Generally east Skagit County gets more heat and sunshine than areas close to Puget Sound.

Improve the amount of light and heat your plant receives by placing it in the sunniest, warmest spot in your garden. Most fruit bearing plants need a daily dose of six to eight hours of full sun to do well. Putting a dwarf fruit tree in a large pot on wheels on your patio might be a way to fill that need. But despite what the catalogues might have you think, not all fruit tree or shrubs thrive in our climate of USDA zone 8A.

These kinds of plants need good soil with excellent drainage. Standing water can be the death knell for many plants. Roots need oxygen! Poor drainage can also lead to diseases such as phytophthora root rot.

Test the area for drainage before you buy your plant. Adding sand, gravel or organic matter to a planting hole will not solve the problem; in fact, it will probably make it worse. Raised beds are a possible solution.

Before adding any mineral supplement to your landscape, determine if deficiencies exist with a soil test. The addition of chemicals (organic or inorganic) to a landscape where no deficiency exists is a waste of money, time and resources, and is environmentally irresponsible.

Our local non-agriculture soils generally have sufficient amounts of these minerals and tend to be slightly acid with 5% organic matter, which is very good for most plants. Because of our winter rainfall, nitrogen levels tend to be low because it leaches out. Local soils have sufficient phosphorus and potassium.



Using bare root plants can result in an interesting addition to your garden. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.*

Fads and myths: The use of vitamin B1 does not stimulate root development in the landscape. Nor does adding phosphate, such as bone meal. Too much phosphate will slow root development, because it kills beneficial soil organisms. And, sorry to say, the use of Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate) as a fertilizer is also not based on scientific evidence.

Overloading the soil can prevent some elements from being taken up and can cause toxic interactions or kill beneficial mycorrhizae. Do not impair your soil's health with overuse of fertilizers and pesticides.

Most woody plants grow more slowly the first two to three years while the roots get established and then the plant takes off! "Mature" means the anticipated plant size at about 10 years. You would be smart to add another 50% for many plants in our climate. And, of course, it will continue to grow after 10 years if its needs are met.

Whether you purchase a bare root tree, a shrub in a plastic pot, or a balled and burlapped plant, the planting steps are similar.

1. Select the site before you purchase. Regardless the size of the plant, make sure there is sufficient space for the mature plant. Pruning to keep something small is not a good idea and is labor intensive over the life of the plant.

2. Prepare the site. Dig a hole the depth of the root ball and twice the width. For permanent landscape plants, do not add soil amendments of any kind, regardless of your soil type.
3. Inspect the roots. This can be done in a large tub, bucket or wheelbarrow full of water. Wash away the soil. Do not put any of it back into the planting hole. Spread the circling roots outward and cut off any broken or torn roots. Keep the roots moist at all times.
4. Plant. Build a small crown of native soil in the planting hole. Place the plant on top of it with the roots spread outwardly. The plant should be at grade or slightly above. Refill the hole with the same native soil and pat gently with your hands. No stomping! Water gently to compact the soil naturally. You may add a small of nitrogen-only fertilizer at this time. Add a thick layer of organic mulch to retain moisture and retard weeds. Do not let the mulch touch the bark.
5. Water. All newly planted trees and shrubs need regular watering their first year or two. Even drought-tolerant plants need additional water to get their root system established.
6. Decide whether or not to stake. Most of the time there is no need to stake at planting time, because the thick mud steadies the root ball. If you're planting in a windy area, you can stake your tree low—no higher than two-thirds of the height with flexible material that allows the tree to move back and forth. This will allow for sturdy root and trunk development. Remove all staking materials within a few months but no later than one year. Trees that remained staked are weaker and more likely to fall or break.

“Right plant, right place,” is the gardener’s mantra. Good planting and management techniques will go a long way toward a healthy, sustainable landscape and garden that will bring you joy and a sense of oneness with the natural system.

### **RESOURCES:**

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