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Bare roots for nuts and fruits

by Nan Stermán

Do you dream of growing juicy nectarines, tart apples or sweet blueberries in your own backyard? These are just a few of the edibles that you can purchase as bare root plants in nurseries this time of year.

A bare root plant is a young, deciduous tree, shrub, woody vine or perennial that was grown in a field, then dug up while dormant and cleaned of all the dirt on its roots. They're carefully packaged to make sure they don't dry out and shipped to nurseries across the country.

January is the perfect time for planting bare root plants in most of California. The days are clear and cool, nights are cold and, unless you live at high elevations, the ground isn't frozen.



The diversity of bare root edibles is truly staggering. There are the traditional stone fruits such as peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums and cherries. Apples, pears and quince are all sold bare root, as are pomegranate and persimmons.

It's best to purchase bare root plants on the day you plan to put them into the ground. If you have to store them briefly, set their roots in a bucket of damp

sand or sawdust, out of direct sunlight.

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To plant a bare root plant:

- Soak root mass in a bucket of water for an hour or two.
- Dig a hole twice as wide and half as deep as the roots. Fill the hole with water and let it drain completely.
- Mix granular organic fertilizer into the soil at the bottom of the hole.
- Throw in a few handfuls of worm castings.
- Set the plant in the hole so the roots are spread fully, rather than cramped or kinked.
- Check the trunk of the tree/shrub for the dirt line. The line shows you how deep the plant sat before the grower dug it up. Replant so it sits an inch higher than the dirt line once the hole is refilled.
- Fill the hole with soil, tamping it down firmly around the roots. Build a watering moat several inches away from the trunk. Water slowly and deeply.
- Cut the main stem of bare root trees back by half. Pruning so severely may be hard, but it ensures the development of new fruiting wood the first spring. Otherwise, the tree won't fruit until the third year.
- Layer 3 inches of composted mulch onto the soil, outside the watering basin. Make sure no mulch touches the trunk.
- Keep the soil moist (not wet) through the first years.

Nan Sterman is an award-winning garden communicator, horticulturist and gardening designer who lives in Encinitas, Calif. She has a bachelor's degree in botany from Duke University, a master's in biology from UC Santa Barbara and has contributed to the Los Angeles Times, The San Diego Union Tribune and Better Homes and Gardens.

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