

THEY'RE NOT DEAD-- THEY'RE BARE-ROOT ROSES

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It started in early January. All those catalogs; all those pictures of beautiful roses... You just couldn't resist. This was the year you were going to do it-plant that first rose garden. So you sent your order off and soon, very soon, you will receive a large package of "things" that have absolutely no resemblance to that catalog image. **DON'T PANIC!**

Nearly all mail-order suppliers ship bare-root roses. These are plants that are sold and shipped while they are dormant. (*Although, to the novice eye, "dead" is the first word that comes to mind.*) As soon as you receive your package, carefully examine each of the plants. Inspect the roots as well as the canes. Bark on the canes should be firm, plump, and green. The root system should be sturdy and fibrous, with several firm, well-branched roots.

Although suppliers attempt to arrange for delivery at the best planting time, Mother Nature often has other ideas. Initially, bare-root plants need only be kept cool and moist until you are ready to plant them. Pack the roots in moisture-retaining material (*ie. peat moss, perlite*). Make sure the material stays damp. Wet newspapers or burlap laid over the canes will further reduce moisture evaporation from the plant. Keeping the plants cool will help keep them dormant. If too warm, they will begin to grow and there will be more risk of injury to foliage or roots when you do plant them.

By the time your roses arrive, you should have decided on your garden location. I prefer to prepare the beds in

the fall so when spring arrives, I'm already to go. If you didn't plan that far in advance though, be sure to keep the following in mind:

SUN: Roses need at least 6 hours of full, direct sunlight each day. Morning sun is preferable, but afternoon can be acceptable.

SPACE: Allow for 2-3' distance between each plant. Roses need good air movement through the foliage to keep them dry and discourage disease. Look around and make sure those drying, morning breezes won't be blocked by planting too close to buildings or other plant materials.

DRAINAGE: Roses need a lot of water but they don't like to be wet. A sure way to kill a rose bush is to have it set in a puddle of water. In this region, where clay is the predominant soil component, drainage is poor or even non-existent. Plan on amending the soil to improve the drainage and consider raising the level of the beds above the natural soil line level.

SOIL: Roses do well in a wide range of soils but prefer loamy soil. I start with a hole that is 20-24" deep and is at least 24" in diameter. I mix the soil I have removed with compost or at least 1/3 of a bale of peat moss/plant as well as about a cup of triple superphosphate (0-46-0) or bone meal. Also, consider having the soil pH tested. Roses prefer a pH of 5½ to 6½.

Plant whenever the ground has thawed and dried out enough to be worked easily. Getting the plants into the ground as early as possible can give the root system a head start before the foliage forms-- but don't be tempted to plant when there is still a chance of freezing temperatures. The combination of cold with a drying wind can be fatal to tender new plants. Remember, bare-root plants are dormant, and can remain that way as long as you keep them cool and damp. Be patient and wait for the right conditions.

When you are ready to actually plant, soak the bare-root plants in water for a few hours (*but no longer than 24 hours*). Take another look at the roots and trim away any that have been broken.

Position the plant vertically in the planting hole by laying a spade handle or stake across the top of the hole to align the bud union with the desired top level of the soil. The bud union is the point at which the hybrid rose plant material is grafted to the rootstock, and it is particularly sensitive to cold. The proper position of the bud union in planting is a point often discussed by experienced rosarians. I have opted to go the safe route, and bury the bud union at least 2 inches below the top soil line. This provides better insulation during winter cold and even with last year's severe temperatures, I have never lost a plant due to cold.

Build a cone of soil mixture in the center of the hole to support the spread-out roots and hold the plant so that the bud union is maintained at the chosen level. With the plant in position, add about 2/3 of your soil mixture around the sides and fill with water. Let

it soak in completely. Fill in the rest of the hole, firm the soil gently with your hand, and soak once again. I prefer to hold off with the first feeding for one month and use a slow release form such as *Osmocote*.

The information I have presented here is bare-bones-basic. There are many different soil mixture recipes as well as opinions regarding bud-union depth and feeding schedules. That's what makes growing roses fun-- there's always more to explore. As the year progresses, you will see many of these ideas expressed in this newsletter and don't forget to take advantage of the large number of consulting rosarians available through the PRS. If you have questions, give any one of them a call!