

Excitement fills the air! March has arrived. Spring officially is fourteen days away. You've spent a serious amount of time scrutinizing your 2015 mail-order plant and seed catalogs. By now, you've made your selections and are eager to place an order. Perhaps, you've already done so. After placing the order, enthusiasm continues to build. Anxiously, you await its arrival. Finally, the day arrives and then it happens— disappointment. The box is smaller than you expected. You had visions of huge blooming plants, but when you tear open the box, all you find are plastic bags filled with slightly moist sphagnum or peat moss surrounding a few scrawny roots that look totally dead. Does this sound familiar?

Chances are you forgot or overlooked the words printed clearly in the catalog— “Shipped bare root.”

From its beginning, when the nursery industry first made mail-order plants available, shipping bare root has been the norm. Why, you ask? Dormant, bare root plants are the easiest to transport. They are lightweight. They are less cumbersome, and they are less expensive to ship.

For the ill-prepared, receiving bare root plants often creates major disillusionment. In that situation I say, “Do not despair.” Rather, I suggest you adopt the American Boy Scout motto, *Be Prepared*. The fact is, dormant, bare root plants are living plant material but for the time being are void of green buds or leaves. They've been specially conditioned for shipping but ready to start growing after planting. If properly handled, bare root plants are capable of becoming the huge blooming plants you dreamed about.

Some of my most beautiful perennials arrived as bare roots. Allow me to share with you a few tips on how to get your mail-order bare root plants growing strong.

When the shipment arrives, immediately unpack it. Carefully examine the contents. If you notice a few broken roots, trim them off. However, if the crown or roots of the plant are soft and mushy and perhaps emit a rotten smell, immediately contact the company for replacement.

It is best to plant immediately after receiving. Fortunately, most mail-order companies will not ship your order until the growing conditions in your area are conducive for planting. However, if weather conditions delay planting, tuck the bare roots back into their peat moss bags and place them in the refrigerator's crisper at 35° to 38° F. Avoid freezing or leaving them in this manner for more than a week.

Before planting, it is always a good idea to soak the roots in water for about an hour. Fortunately, planting instructions generally accompany the order. Follow the guidelines closely. Never allow bare root plants to be exposed to the sun or wind. They must be kept moist and cool at all times prior to planting.

Sometimes I've resorted to planting bare-root plants indoors in containers, allowing them to become established, then I transplant them to the outdoor landscape in late spring after growing conditions are ideal, and the threat of frost is gone.

After planting, please be patient. Once planted, bare-root plants generally take longer to start growing and establish compared with those that were container grown. One must realize a bare root plant must establish a strong root system before upward growth becomes visible. Most spring-planted bare root plants will take four to six weeks before upper growth begins to appear.

In summary, know all you can about caring for bare-root plants before they arrive. The fact remains, if cared for properly, bare-root plants will produce just as much excitement as any other transplant. The key is, *Be Prepared*.