The time has arrived to get bare-root plants in the ground

Although many gardening activities remain on hold for a few more weeks, it is the time of year to get bare-root plants in the ground. Bare-root plants are available now and should be planted between mid-February and mid-April.

Bare-root plants are those harvested, stored and sold without any type of soil or growing media attached to the roots. The plants are harvested while they’re in dormancy, which reduces potential stress on the plants. Fruit trees, small fruits, roses, some perennials, and some ornamental shrubs and trees respond well to this type of production and planting method.

When shopping the local nursery or garden store for bare-root plants, look for those that are dormant and not showing any new growth. Shoppers will typically find these plants prepackaged in a colorful bag containing a moist medium such as sawdust to protect the plants from becoming desiccated before they can be planted. When gardeners get home with the new plants, cut open the bag to make sure the roots are still damp. Add water if necessary and keep them damp until planting. Be sure to remove all of the bag, strings or wires before planting.

Never leave the roots exposed to air. They feature very fine root hairs, which aren’t visible to the naked eye, that are responsible for moisture and nutrient uptake. These fine root hairs die when exposed to dry air even for just a short amount of time. It’s best to keep the roots damp and covered to protect those fine root hairs while preparing the planting hole.

Plant trees and shrubs at the same depth at which they were growing in the field or nursery. Look for the texture and color change between the trunk or stem and the roots. Don’t cover the base of the plant with more than about an inch of soil. A major cause of plant failure is planting too deep, especially in poorly drained clay soil.

When ready to plant, dig a hole that’s large enough to accommodate the root system without crowding or twisting. Make sure the hole isn’t deeper than the original root depth and at least twice the spread of roots. Gardeners who observe broken or damaged roots should remove them. A mound or cone may be made in the center of the hole to accommodate the spread of roots and allow the tree or shrub to rest at the proper depth while backfilling the hole.

Work the soil under and around the roots to remove air pockets. Firm the soil while filling until the hole is three-quarters full, and then fill the hole with water. This will settle soil around the roots. After the water has soaked in, finish filling the hole with soil and water again, but don’t pack the soil again. If the soil around the plant settles, bring it back up to grade with additional soil.