

Planting Guide for Semidwarf Bare-Root Fruit Trees

Planting fruit trees as bare-root plants makes for healthier trees that soon catch up to their potted brethren and are more affordable, with a wider selection of cultivars to choose from. Selecting a semidwarf bare-root fruit tree means you can grow your own fruit in even a small space and can comfortably prune, spray and harvest for many seasons with your feet firmly on the ground. For best results, plant your semidwarf bare-root fruit tree as soon as you bring it home from the nursery or receive it from the mail order or online grower in late winter.

Fruit Tree Sizes

Most varieties of tree fruit grow on plants that are grafted rather than grown from seed. This means that the roots and lower trunk of a variety with a particular height and hardiness are spliced to the growing stock, or scion, of a cultivar with desirable fruit. As the parts grow together, the new tree retains the size of the root stock while producing the fruit of the scion. This means that virtually any specific fruit available as a large, or standard, tree that grows 25 to 30 feet tall can also be found as a semidwarf tree that reaches only 10 to 15 feet or even as a dwarf tree that grows only 10 feet tall. All three produce fruit of the same size. Semidwarf trees are considered the most productive of the varieties and are easier to manage. They don't require the staking needed by top-heavy dwarf trees, they are easier to prune and care for than taller standards, and they bear fruit in four to five years, rather than the five to seven years it can take standard trees.

Bare-Root Planting

Bare-root fruit trees are a disappointing purchase at first glance. Usually sold as 1- to 2-year-old plants, bare-root fruit trees have slim, sticklike trunks either devoid of branches or with just a few twigs and a small tangle of roots stuffed in a plastic bag of damp sawdust. Unlike the leafed-out, potted fruit tree you might pay a hefty price for in the spring, less-expensive bare-root trees are usually sold or shipped for planting only during the winter dormant season. Because you put them in the ground when they are not actively growing and they are surrounded by your garden's native soil, bare-root trees

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begin to grow immediately in the spring, when newly planted container trees are suffering the stress of new soil and surroundings.

Soil Preparation and Spacing

Most fruit trees require full sun, and all need soil that drains well. Don't plant your bare-root semidwarf fruit tree in a spot where a hole 1 foot deep and wide doesn't fully drain four hours after filling it to the top with water. The planting hole itself should be 3 to 4 feet wide and slightly deeper than the root ball. Heavy clay soil may need a few shovelfuls of compost; otherwise, no amendment or fertilizer is recommended at planting time. The most important precaution for starting off a healthy tree is to avoid burying any part of the trunk. A shovel or rake handle across the planting hole provides a visual to let you adjust the roots so that the top layer is just below the soil's surface when planting. The grafting scar, usually 2 inches to 1 foot from the bottom of the trunk, should face northeast. This encourages initial top growth to grow slightly to the south to cast shade that helps prevent sunscald on the tender young bark. A semidwarf tree needs a 15-foot-diameter clearance. The pollination requirements of some fruit trees can mean you need more than one plant to get fruit.

Initial Care

Though it may seem like adding insult to injury, one of the first things you should do with a newly planted bare-root fruit tree is prune it. Cutting the tree back to about knee height encourages it to develop more low, lateral branches for better fruiting. Fruit trees are generally pruned at least every winter to control the spacing of branches. While semidwarf trees do not grow especially tall, regular pruning keeps them healthy, productive and compact for many years. Newly planted bare-root trees need plenty of water to settle the soil around the roots, at which time you can make any necessary adjustments if the tree's root flare sinks below the soil surface. Once the plant begins growing in the spring, water deeply at least twice a week during the tree's first growing season, and mulch to retain moisture and keep down weeds.