

Preparation and Planting Guide - Bare root plants

We've outlined below the ideal way to prepare the site and plant a new hedge (for those with the time and energy!) but we hope these notes will still be helpful to those with less time or energy – hedging plants are generally very robust and as long as they get water and are kept free of weeds, most hedges will do well.

Preparation of the site

Even if you are planting small plants, you need to prepare a substantial cleared area ready for a new hedge. We recommend you dig over a trench at least 30cm (12") wide and 25cm (9") deep for small plants (plant height up to 60cm) or wider and deeper for taller plants. Make sure the soil is easily workable. It is really important to remove all perennial weeds. Make sure there is good drainage in the trench by using a garden fork on the sides and bottom to create drainage routes. This will also make it easier for the roots to penetrate the soil and take hold.

Try not to plant:

- if it has been raining heavily as this makes the soil compacted and too "solid" for tiny new roots to grow
- when there is a very cold wind – or at least make sure the plants are out of their pots for the minimum time

If you need to improve the soil you can use well rotted garden compost, well rotted farmyard manure, or any general purpose compost (available everywhere). If the soil is very wet, you could add sharp sand or lime free course grit.

All the species we sell can be planted into decent soil without the need for soil conditioners but if you wish you can also add bonemeal to the soil as this promotes root growth. It is very important that the bonemeal does not come into contact with the plant roots or stems (it is a strong fertiliser and can "burn" the plants) so it should be mixed through the soil/compost (just put a handful in the bottom of the planting hole and fork it through – please use a gardening glove at all times when handling fertilisers).

We also recommend the use of the RHS approved RootGrow product, particularly for bare roots. It gives plants a boost of the friendly fungi they use to help them find moisture and nutrients in the soil – use of RootGrow dramatically shortens the time it takes plants to establish and gives vigorous growth. Unlike bonemeal, RootGrow does need to be in direct contact with the roots.

Planting

If the weather is suitable and you have time to do it properly, then planting bare roots immediately is ideal, but do not be tempted to rush the job or do it in windy, wet or frosty weather. You can store them for a few days by soaking the roots in a bucket of water for up to 2 hours and then drain and keep in an unheated but protected position like a garage or shed (but not a greenhouse). Alternatively, you can "heel them in" by planting them in a bundle, the roots covered with loose soil which is kept moist. Plants that have been "heeled in" can be kept like that for a couple of weeks and sometimes longer (depending on the weather).

Avoid planting during frosts or on windy or very wet days. Wind can dry out bare roots before you can get them into the ground and very wet weather can lead to compaction around the roots, inhibiting initial root growth. If there is even a light wind, keep the bundle of bare roots in a sheltered place or in the packaging and just take out a few roots at a time, to minimise their exposure.

The trench needs to be slightly wider than the roots and the level judged carefully so that the soil level will come to the old soil mark on the stems. Spread the roots out carefully. If you are using canes on taller plants or to pin rabbit guards in place, take note of where to drive in the cane so that the roots will not be damaged.

Make sure the soil is firmed down well around the plant (but not compacted) so that there are no air pockets where frost could form. Water each plant really thoroughly (approx 5 litres per plant) and you could apply a bark mulch* (see note overleaf) around the base of each plant (but not touching the stem) to suppress weeds, protect from frost and retain moisture.

Bare Roots - the quick way

We're sufficiently realistic to know that if customers are planting a long stretch of bare root hedging, the ideal planting method is unlikely to be followed. Where you can accept the trade off of a possible higher failure rate in return for a huge time saving, you can use notch planting for small plants. Push a sharp spade to close to its full depth in the soil then push the spade away from you to open up a gap behind it and slot the bare root plant under the soil, release the soil and firm in. Regularly check that the notch has not opened up, particularly after frost or in dry weather. We must emphasise that there may well be a higher failure rate with this planting method.

Aftercare

It is critical that new plants get the space to themselves so that they can obtain moisture, nutrients and light so weeds and grass need to be kept away from the hedge for the first 2 or 3 years.

Another factor that determines the success or failure of a new plant is lack of water, even in winter when they are dormant and particularly in March, April and May as deciduous plants break dormancy. Drench each plant thoroughly so that the water will get down to the roots. Our guide for dry weather is to use at least 5 litres of water per metre of hedging twice a week. Always water in the evening, so that the sun does not evaporate the water. Evergreens benefit from having their foliage sprayed.

Frosts are another enemy of the immature hedge. If there are heavy frosts after planting, the soil can break up, so the plants may need to be firmed in again. Severe frosts will cause damage to leaves – generally they will recover but weather damage is always a risk you need to be aware of, particularly with new plants. Larger plants generally suffer more than smaller plants, evergreens more than deciduous.

In windy sites, the wind can “rock” new plants opening up air pockets where either frost can get in or roots can be exposed to drying winds. Firm in the plants from time to time. Ideally evergreens need to be sheltered from drying winds during their first winter and growing season. If the weather is particularly severe or the site is subject to strong winds, it would be sensible to put up some windbreak netting to help prevent the plants drying out before their roots are established.

Hedge plants are planted close together so there is competition between the roots for nutrients and the trimming of hedges clips away much of the plant's food-producing unit so an annual mulch of well rotted manure or compost or any annual feed of a foliar fertiliser is helpful to maintain vigour.

In the first year after planting, plants often come into leaf or flower much later than established plants. Evergreen plants (or semi evergreens) often defoliate or the leaves turn yellow when transplanted. Evergreens also have a tendency to defoliate when they first experience warm, dry weather. If your plants experience any of these, just increase the frequency of watering (but don't make them waterlogged) and new leaves will appear.

Please refer to any good gardening book for details of how to prune – the timing of pruning and the amount to be pruned vary by species and depending on whether you want a formal or informal hedge so it is too complex to cover in detail here. However, the general principles are:

- Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Privet should be pruned immediately after planting and the subsequent season's new growth reduced by about half
- Other deciduous species should be lightly pruned when planted and then pruned by one third of the annual growth the autumn after planting
- Evergreens generally do not need to be touched at all until after a full growing season when the side shoots can be trimmed but the main leading shoot should be left until the hedge reaches the desired height.

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