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Bare-Root Tree Planting Checklist

Zones 3–8: plant in spring as soon as the soil can be worked, before the buds open. Zones 9–10: warm-region guides plant dormant trees in winter, December to February. Work down the steps in order.

1. ☐ **Inspect the tree the day it arrives**
   Roots should be firm and heavy, buds green and firm, with no mold. Plant soon; if you must wait, store it cool (about 40°F) with the packing kept damp.

2. ☐ **Trim broken roots and soak them**
   Cut off damaged or broken roots, then soak the roots in a bucket of water for one to two hours.

3. ☐ **Dig a wide, shallow hole**
   Make it two to two and a half times wider than the root spread and only as deep as the roots, from trunk flare to root tips.

4. ☐ **Build a cone of soil in the hole**
   Spread the roots evenly over the cone so none are twisted, bent or kinked.

5. ☐ **Keep the graft union above the soil**
   Set the tree so the graft union (the bulge where variety meets rootstock) sits about 4 inches above the soil line. If it is buried, the variety roots and the tree grows full size.

6. ☐ **Backfill with the soil you dug out**
   Do not add compost, sand or fertilizer to the hole. Firm the soil around the roots with your hands as you go.

7. ☐ **Water in twice while backfilling**
   Water when the hole is three-quarters full and again when it is level with the ground, to settle out air pockets. Top up soil that sinks.

8. ☐ **Stake loosely for the first year**
   Drive two or three stakes into undisturbed soil outside the hole and tie with wide, flexible material that lets the tree move a little. Apple trees on dwarfing rootstocks need a post or trellis for life, not just the first year.

9. ☐ **Head an unbranched tree back at planting**
   Cut a single-stem whip back to 30 to 36 inches above the ground, just above a bud, so it branches where you want scaffolds. Warm-region guides for zones 9–10 (California, Texas, Florida) cut lower, to 18 to 24 inches, and the rules differ by fruit.

10. ☐ **Fit a white trunk guard**
    A white guard that lets air flow around the trunk reflects winter sun and protects the bark from voles and rabbits.

11. ☐ **Water daily, then every few days**
    Daily for the first two weeks, every two to three days until week 12, then weekly until roots are established.

12. ☐ **Hold off on fertilizer at planting**
    Feed later only as a soil test or weak growth calls for it.

Variety _____ **Rootstock** _____

Date planted _____ **Where** _____

Sources: Iowa State University Extension and Outreach; University of Minnesota; Virginia Cooperative Extension and 4 more (full list at the web address on the left)

Data as of 15 Nov 2026