

# WASHING TREE AND SHRUB ROOTS

by Lyn Chimera

Science keeps making discoveries to improve growing techniques. An example is root washing for trees and shrubs. Why? Often roots develop problems such as girdling which should be dealt with before planting to ensure the long term health of tree or shrub.

There are three ways trees and shrubs are prepared for sale. Each has potential problems. Balled-in-burlap keeps the soil intact making it impossible for us to see the root structure. The process of mechanically digging up a tree and wrapping it causes soil to be pushed up around the trunk often covering the root flair. The tree is already planted too deep! Balled trees are often grown in heavy clay soil as it holds together. This is not ideal soil to add to your yard or garden!

Container growing involves repotting several times before the plant is offered for sale. Frequently the roots circle in the pot or deform from the restricted space. The root flair can be buried deeper with each repotting.

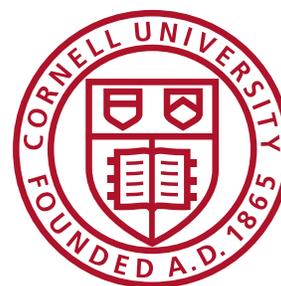
Bare root is an economical and practical way to buy trees & shrubs. Obviously, you can easily see any root problems. One area of concern with this method is proper storage. The roots must be kept moist and cooled to an appropriate temperature, so they don't break dormancy.

Root washing can solve all the problems from the first two methods. It enables you to see the growth pattern of the roots and makes the root flair visible. To accomplish root washing use a wheelbarrow or deep container and use a hose and your hands to gently remove the soil. Patience is required!

Once the roots are freed, corrective root pruning can be easily accomplished. Other advantages of this system are that the tree or shrub roots can be flared out easily in the planting hole and the root contact with the native soil is assured.

Of course, as with any issue there are conflicting opinions. Washing the roots can cause damage to the small feeder roots so being gentle is essential. It's also essential to water the tree or shrub frequently during the first year. A few

articles also recommended root washing for perennials. That seems like a lot of work but I'm going to try it with perennials that are pot bound. ■



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