

Planting a Bare Root Ocotillo

The Ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) is a woody shrub; it is not a cactus and therefore is not a succulent plant and should not be treated as such. Most mature Ocotillos found in nurseries have been salvaged directly from the desert. Their root systems may be damaged or barely existing after having been removed from habitat. Following are guidelines in choosing a healthy plant and planting it in a manner that will maximize its chances for continued survival.

CHOOSING A HEALTHY OCOTILLO: When you arrive at the nursery or plant sale, the Ocotillos will generally be bare-root. Their canes will be tied up and they will be stacked or leaning upright against a support for customer viewing. Occasionally, a nursery will plant the new arrivals in a sand bed. Before purchasing a plant, inspect the roots. The greater the size of the root system, the better your chances are for success. Reject plants whose roots are extensively damaged or broken. You want the freshest Ocotillo you can buy so your next step is to find out when the plants arrived. Many plants are shipped from out-of-state; you do not want a plant that has been sitting around for more than 1 – 2 weeks. If all plants available are fresh but appear to look identical, what do you do? You manually heft them to determine weight. The heavier the plant, the more moisture it contains and, again, the better its chance for survival. If you have the luxury of special ordering an Ocotillo, request a large root system.

PLANTING YOUR NEW OCOTILLO: You've chosen your plant and now you want to plant it. Inspect the roots again. Look for any cracked or broken roots. The plant has been removed from its natural habitat and is bound to exhibit some damage no matter how carefully you have chosen it. Broken roots must be pruned with a sharp pair of pruners or loppers to remove the damaged portion. Leave the canes tied up for ease of handling. Before planting, prepare a solution of root hormone and soak the root system. If you don't have this on hand, apply Fertilome as directed below. Dig a hole at least one foot wider and deeper than the root system. Amend the backfill with 30% coarse sand to provide a better drainage environment for the roots. Partially fill the hole with amended soil and stand the plant up in it so that the base of the plant is level with the top of the hole. Continue filling with amended soil, packing and tamping the soil under and around the root system. After backfilling, create a well around the plant that is slightly larger in diameter than was the hole. At this point the canes can be untied and carefully untangled from one another. When this is done, stand back several feet from your newly planted Ocotillo and survey it from all sides. Your Ocotillo should have a naturally upright look; if it is obviously tilted to one side or another, give it a gentle push to adjust while a second person re-tamps the soil.

WATERING A NEWLY PLANTED OCOTILLO: Newly planted Ocotillos should be watered in immediately. Remember that they are woody shrubs, not cactus. Keep the soil moist with weekly deep watering. As the water is added, the canes can also be misted or sprayed. Ocotillos respond naturally to humidity and rainfall and it is believed that the canes absorb moisture. If you did not use root hormone before planting, apply Fertilome (following package directions), which is a water-soluble combination of fertilizer and root stimulator. A second application should be made again after 30 days.