PLANTS FOR THE LAKE TAHOE BASIN

Mountain Whitethorn

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(Ceanothus cordulatus)

**DESCRIPTION AND GROWTH CHARACTERISTICS**

Mountain whitethorn, also known as snowbush, is commonly found on the rocky ridges and open flats of the mixed conifer and red fir forests of California and Southwestern Oregon.

Mountain whitethorn is a densely branched, spiny, evergreen, flat topped shrub which reaches heights of 2 to 5 feet. However, at higher elevations such as the Lake Tahoe Basin it assumes a low spreading growth form. Individual plants may spread to form continuous ground cover over areas with a diameter up to 12 feet. The numerous stems terminate in a hard sharp point thus, the name whitethorn.

Whitethorn flowers form in small, dense clusters 1 to 2 inches long. The flowers which bloom from late spring to mid summer have a heavy penetrating fragrance. During the flowering season the abundant white flowers may cause areas to appear covered with snow.

**ESTABLISHMENT AND CARE**

Mountain whitethorn seeds mature in late August and September. The seeds are contained within a triangular capsule. Collected capsules should be stored in paper bags and allowed to dry until they open and reveal the seeds.

The seed has a hard exterior coat and therefore a combination of soaking in hot water and cold storage pretreatments are necessary. Seeds should be placed in hot water, preheated to 180°F, and then allowed to cool and soak for 24 hours. Following this hot water treatment mix the seed with moist sand, place the mixture in plastic bags and store in the refrigerator.

Periodically check the bags for moisture and for swelling of the seed which indicates that they are close to germinating. Once the seeds have swollen, plant them in containers of potting soil and cover them with approximately 1/2 inch of soil.

After the plants have formed a third pair of leaves they can be transplanted individually to larger 1/2 to 1 gallon containers. The young plants will be ready for their permanent location in 1 1/2 to 2 years. New plants should be watered occasionally until they are well established; after which, deep watering every 1 to 1 1/2 months will be adequate to maintain uniform growth.

Container grown plants may be available from local nurseries. Dig a hole two to three times the diameter of the rootball and at least six inches deeper. Backfill the hole with six inches of native soil. Make a few, one-eighth inch deep vertical cuts in the rootball, or carefully "tease" roots away from the rootball with your hands to encourage roots to grow into the new soil. Set the plant into the hole and fill in around the roots, firming the soil with your hands as you fill, until the hole is half full. Fill the hole with water and allow it to settle. This will settle the soil and eliminate air pockets around the roots.

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Backfill with enough planting mix so the plant will set at the same level it was growing at in the container. Water to allow the soil to settle, then add more soil if necessary. Build a berm of soil to form a watering basin around the outer edge of the hole. Break the basin down after two or three years.

USES OF MOUNTAIN WHITE-HORN

Mountain whitethorn is well suited to dry open flats and rocky slopes with well-drained soils. It can be used for ground cover on slopes, terraces or steep banks and as a barrier plant. Mountain whitethorn may be allowed to assume natural forms or may be shaped through pruning and pinching off the growing tips.