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Shrubs for mountain communities

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Quick Facts

Consider length of growing season, soil and exposure before selecting shrubs for specific sites.

Plant shrubs only in the spring; select them, where possible, from northern sources.

Application of a natural mulch around the shrub over the root area helps delay freezing of the soil in the fall and aids in the retention of soil moisture.

Shrub Establishment

The following shrub list does not take into consideration the range of climatic and soil conditions at a given elevation.

Soil moisture and drainage. The shrub list includes a notation on special moisture and drainage conditions for best performance survival.

Exposure. Some plants perform better in the shade than in the sun and vice versa.

Length of frost-free period. Some shrubs may survive at a given elevation but may not produce flowers or fruit due to a very short frost-free period.

Plant shrubs as early in spring as possible.

Avoid fall planting.

Condition of nursery-grown plants at planting time is important. Most nursery stock in Colorado is grown below 6,000 feet and may be in a succulent stage and not hardened enough to withstand the climatic conditions found at higher elevations at planting time. Acclimate such plants to higher altitudes by gradual exposure to mountain conditions for a period of several days or weeks.

A mulch (pine needles and wood chips) 4 to 6 inches deep over the root area forms an effective insulation against early freezes and helps maintain

a better moisture supply in the soil. Avoid finely pulverized peat and other materials that tend to "cake" or crust.

Soils that are too loose and gravelly, or too "tight" and of heavy clay, can be improved with compost, peat, aged manure, sand or a combination of these and other amendments. Work these amendments into the soil to improve the soil around the tree.

Shrub Selection

Shrubs hardy to at least 10,000 feet elevation

Alnus tenuifolia, Thinleaf Alder: Native shrub for moist soils. Often grown as a multi-stem, tree-like clump.

Amelanchier alnifolia, Serviceberry: Native. Useful on rocky, dry slopes. Edible blue fruit.

Betula glandulosa, Bog Birch: Dwarf native for moist soils. Hardy above timberline.

Caragana arborescens, Siberian Peashrub: Tolerates dry sites. Yellow, sweet-pea-like flowers in early summer.

Cercocarpus montanus, Mountain Mahogany: Native. Useful on dry, south slopes. Showy "feather-like" seed heads in fall. More common below 8,500 feet.

Cotoneaster acutifolia, Peking Cotoneaster: Hardy above 10,000 feet. Fruit (blackberry) may not mature above 8,500 feet. Tolerates dry sites.

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Holodiscus dumosus, Mountain-Spirea: Native. Showy "mist" of creamy flowers in summer and tan fruit in fall. Dry, rocky exposure.

Jamesia americana, Mountain Mockorange: Native of rocky slopes. Showy, white, waxy flowers.

Juniperus sabina, Savin Juniper: Hardy but of slow growth above 8,500 feet. An upright spreading evergreen.

Lonicera involucrata, Bearberry Honeysuckle: Native in moist, rich soils. Foliage glossy green. Black fruit in pairs with showy, red, leaflike bracts.

Lonicera korolkowi, 'Zabels' Blueleaf Honeysuckle: Foliage bluish green. Flowers pink and red. Fruit bright red. Tolerates shade. The similar Tatarian Honeysuckle also is hardy to at least 10,000 feet.

Mahonia repens, Creeping Grape-holly: Native, low, creeping broad-leaf evergreen. Best results when used in areas with dark mountain soils. Shade-tolerant.

Potentilla fruticosa, Shrubby Cinquefoil: Low native shrub with bright, yellow flowers and soft, finely divided leaves. Cultivated varieties available. Useful on dry, sunny slopes.

Ribes spp., Currant and Gooseberry: Several native and introduced species available. Thrives best in rich soil but will tolerate dry, rocky slopes. Edible fruit.

Salix spp., Willow: Among the more than 10 species of native willows hardy to 10,000 feet or more, the most common is Mountain Willow, *Salix monticola* with striking yellow twigs in winter. Other species can be selected for colorful purple, black, red and orange stems. Should be used in moist soils, such as along streams or ponds.

Sambucus pubens, Redberried Elder: Native, compact shrub with showy white flowers and scarlet berries. Berries are edible, but not tasty.

Shepherdia canadensis, Canada Buffaloberry: Low native with brownish, scaly twigs and brown-dotted scaly leaves. Red berries are edible but bitter. Shade tolerant.

Sorbaria sorbifolia, Ural False-Spirea: Summer-flowering, creeping shrub; useful for soil erosion control. Flowers are white on stiffly upright stems. Should be cut to 6-inch stubble each spring.

Sorbus scopulina, Native Mountain-ash: Does best in moist, wooded areas. Flowers white in flat clusters. Fruit red.

Syringa laciniata persica, Persian Lilac: Hardy over 10,000 feet. Flowers lavender in late June above 9,000 feet. Best with irrigation.

Syringa vulgaris, Common lilac: Similar to the Persian Lilac but leaves are broader. One of the most common non-natives in the mountains.

Viburnum opulus, European Cranberrybush: The sterile form, var. *roseum*, is the common Snowball Bush. The latter does not produce fruit. Best with irrigation.

Shrubs hardy to at least 9,000 feet elevation

Acer glabrum, Mountain Maple: Tall native with scarlet fall color. Useful on north exposures.

Betula fontinalis, Water Birch: Cherry-like bark. Tall shrub for moist places.

Cornus stolonifera, Red-osier Dogwood: Grows to 9,500 feet in some areas. Colorful red stems in winter. Should be used in moist soils.

Juniperus sabina tamariscifolia, Tamarix Juniper: The "Tammy Juniper" of the nursery trade. Low-spreading evergreen rarely over 3 feet high unless crowded.

Prunus melanocarpa, Chokecherry: Tall, upright native for moist locations. Black fruit is edible. The related Pin Cherry, *P. pennsylvanica* has unpalatable, red fruit.

Purshia tridentata, Antelope Brush: Low, dense shrub for dry, rocky, south slopes.

Rubus spp., Raspberry: The native, *R. strigosus*, is hardy over 10,000 feet. Most garden varieties are more dependable below 9,000 feet. Useful in rocky but moist places. Tasty fruit in August.

Shrubs hardy to at least 8,000 feet elevation

Acer ginnala, Amur Maple: Possibly hardy to 9,000 feet.

Artemisia abrotanum, Wormwood Sage: Plant for dry sites. Useful as a low hedge. Many native sage species also useful.

Berberis thunbergii, Japanese Barberry: Also available in red-leafed and dwarf forms. Thorny stems. Often slow to establish. Shade-tolerant.

Chrysothamnus nauseosus, Rabbitbrush: Showy, yellow flowers in late summer. Useful in poor, dry soils.

Euonymus vegetus, Wintercreeper Euonymus: Broadleaved evergreen for north or east exposures. Should be used in good soils with consistent moisture.

Juniperus communis, Common Juniper: Low, spreading evergreen in shaded locations. Best in rich soil.

Liqustrum vulgare, Common Privet: Useful hedge. May be tender above 8,000 feet.

Rhus trilobata, Skunkbush Sumac: Native for dry, sunny slopes. Useful for erosion control. Red fruit.

Rosa harrisoni, Harrison Yellow Rose: This species and the Redleaf Shrubrose, *R. rubrifolia*, are dependable to at least 8,500 feet. Colorful, late spring flowers.

Rubus deliciosus, Boulder Raspberry (Thimbleberry): Showy, white flowers. Fruit not tasty. Best in moist soils. Tolerates shade.

Sambucus canadensis, American Elder: Usually freezes to ground above 8,000 feet. Flowers white. Edible, red fruit.

Spiraea bumalda "Froebel," Spirea: Lilac-colored flowers in summer. Should be cut to stubble in late spring. Avoid alkaline soils.

Spiraea thunbergii, Bridalwreath Spirea: Masses of tiny, white flowers in late spring. Thin, delicate branching pattern. Best in full sun.

Spiraea vanhouttei, VanHoutte Spirea: Oldtime favorite. Shrubs have graceful, weeping habit. Probably hardy up to 9,000 feet but may suffer some winterkill.

Syringa villosa, Late Lilac: Among the last of lilacs to bloom (July at high elevations). Flowers red-dish to magenta. Variety MacFarland in common usage.

Viburnum lantana, Wayfaringtree Viburnum: Observed growing above 9,000 feet but more reliable no higher than 8,500 feet. Mature fruit resembles raisins. Foliage gray-green.