

Desert Seasons

Mountain States Wholesale Nursery's Newsletter to the Trade

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Ocotillo, Beauty Of The Wild West

Much like the stately saguaro cactus and the wickedly branched Joshua tree, ocotillos symbolize the natural beauty of the Wild West. All three are indigenous to extremely arid regions and live for many decades. Humans have become so enamored by these plants that many a specimen has been plucked from the natural environment to adorn residential landscapes. Certainly harvesting such plants from rights-of-ways to save them from the blade is a noble thing, but sometimes the end result can be unpredictable. Transplanting elderly plants is tricky and often requires a lot of skill and equipment.

Field grown ocotillos cultivated from seed appeared to offer an earth friendly alternative. So, several years ago as we began to develop the acreage near Luke Air Force base we put in a few extra-long rows of ocotillo seedlings. Well, as you might expect these plants took off growing and now we are pleased to offer field grown ocotillos with all the natural beauty of a wild plant, but with significantly higher survival rates.

Interested in learning more about ocotillos? Well, let's begin with some background. The ocotillo family



24" *Fouquieria splendens* Grade A

(*Fouquieriaceae*) is unique in that it has but one genus, *Fouquieria* (foo-kwee-é-ri-a). Most likely you have not heard of Doctor Pierre Fouquier, but both the family and genus were named to honor this 19th century French professor of medicine.

The *Fouquieria* genus includes several species, of which three have been successfully grown at the Luke yard. They include the common ocotillo

(*F. splendens*), palo adán or Adam's tree (*F. diguetii*), and the tree ocotillo (*F. macdougallii*). Within the genus, but not included in our initial effort, is the magical Boojum tree (*F. columnaris*), which is native to west-central Sonora and Baja, Mexico. Perhaps one day we will try this one. Let's look at each species of *Fouquieria* in more detail.

FOUQUIERIA SPLENDENS...OCOTILLO

The common ocotillo is found over a large range of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts from Baja, California eastward to the Trans-Pecos in Texas and south to Zacatecas, Mexico. Essentially trunkless it forms a wand-like, many stemmed shrub 10 to 20 feet tall. Each of the slender branches is adorned with stiff spines. Ocotillo is generally leafless except for brief periods following a rain when ½" to 1 ½" elliptical waxy leaves are rapidly produced. Once the moisture disappears the leaves drop off almost as quickly. Dense clusters of reddish-orange

(continued)



flowers are produced on the branch tips typically from February through May. Hardy to 10°F. USDA Zone 7.

FOUQUIERIA DIGUETII...PALO ADÁN OR ADAM'S TREE

Fouquieria diguetii is native to the Sonoran scrub lands of Sonora and both Baja states of Mexico. This species somewhat resembles that of the ocotillo except that it is more treelike in shape. The stems are also thicker and more twisted. It is very slow growing and will require many years to reach full maturity. The ultimate size range is from 6 to 15 feet from one or more basal stems. The leaves are similar but often smaller and thicker than *F. splendens*. The starburst shaped inflorescence (cluster of flowers) occurs on branch tips. The inflorescence is more compact than the common ocotillo and the tubular flowers are darker red. Flowering occurs quickly following seasonal rainfall mostly February to May. Due to its tropical origin this plant is fairly tender and is hardy to about 25°F. USDA 9 b.

FOUQUIERIA MACDOUGALII...TREE OCOTILLO

The tree ocotillo lives up to its name as it grows quickly to become a large shrub or tree often reaching 18 feet in height (occasionally to 33 feet) with a weeping branch habit. It too may have one or more thick trunks. In youth this species often closely resembles the Adam's Tree, but the leaves tend to be larger and the yellowish brown bark peels off the trunk in large sections during the dry season. It is common from the Sonoran scrub lands to the tropical deciduous forest where it becomes distinctively more tree like. The large, many branched terminal panicles have bright red tubular flowers occurring after seasonal rains predominately between July and October. Tree ocotillo may be damaged at temperatures below 15°F. USDA Zone 8.



36" squat *Fouquieria macdougalii*

Despite the slight differences between the various species we offer they do have some commonalities that are easily recognized. All three species are armored, bearing sharp spines the length of the branches. These can be formidable especially in close proximity to walks and patios. They are commonly found on rocky slopes and desert flats with well-drained rocky, gravelly, or sandy soil. This is a good indication that they do not like wet, soggy feet. Ocotillos may be grown from seed and the common ocotillo roots readily from terminal cuttings. One often hears the stories of living fences and corrals being constructed from stems laid closed together in trenches. While this is true, the fence requires a bit of bolstering with wire to keep the upper stems connected.

SITE SELECTION

Ocotillos can become quite large so they should be provided ample room to grow. Older specimens may reach 15 feet in height and 10 or more feet in width. As mentioned previously care should be taken in regards to placement near walks, drives and structures. If planted too close to a wall the wind can create quite a ruckus as the canes scrub the surface. The site should be open and sunny to allow for best growth. Again, soil drainage is critical as most of the problems associated with ocotillos are related to poor soil percolation.

PLANTING

Most garden experts agree that ocotillos may be planted successfully at any time of the year, but that spring and fall are best for ease in transplanting. Wild harvested plants are particular to the orientation of the sun requiring planting in the same direction as it was in the wild to avoid sun scorch. As a rule, nursery grown plants are placed fairly close together in rows and generally do not have issues related to sun scorch. There is no need to worry about orientation for bare root or container grown ocotillos.

The planting depth is more critical, so pay particular attention to the soil line on the trunk. Upon close inspection a distinct mark will be visible where the trunk emerges from the ground on bare root plants. This is the target for the soil line during back fill. Containerized plants should be planted no deeper than the depth of the soil in the box.

The planting hole should be wide enough to accommodate the root system and no deeper than the root system. Once the hole is dug be sure to check for drainage by filling the hole





Adam's Tree Flower

with water. If it drains within an hour you are good to plant. If it takes longer than this then you may want to consider changing locations or mounding the soil at the planting site. Placing

gravel at the bottom of the planting pit will not improve drainage. There is no need for adding organic amendment to the soil.

The roots of bare root plants should be inspected for any broken or damaged roots. These should be cleanly pruned prior to planting. This has been done already on containerized plants so do not disturb the root ball. Care should be taken to ensure that there are no air pockets in the backfill material. Use the handle of the shovel to work soil in amongst the roots of bare root plants to ensure that the backfill is packed firmly around the stubby roots. This can be done with the containerized plants as well using water to help fill the voids with a mud slurry. There should be no need to use stakes or guys even though the plant is placed very shallow in the soil. If however there are issues with blow over on bare root plants consider using large stones placed 6 inches or so away from the trunk to support the canes until they root.

IRRIGATION

This is the area where many experts disagree. Some indicate that ocotillos should not receive any flood irrigation for 30 or more days to avoid issues with root rot. This concept is primarily intended for wild harvested plants. For our interests we will concentrate on freshly dug field grown and containerized plants. These should be watered frequently, preferably with drip irrigation placed in a wide, shallow well (4" x 18 to 30"). The drip emitters should be kept 6 to 12" from the trunk.

Most agree that freshly planted ocotillos should be irrigated weekly at a minimum during the summer months and twice per month during the winter. Once established (you will know when they leaf out routinely and start to flower which may take anywhere from 6 to 24 months) then you can begin to

back off on the water. Most established ocotillos do not require any supplemental water during the cooler months and certainly no more than every second to fourth week during the hottest of summers.

Daily misting of the canes has been purported to greatly enhance survival of bare root ocotillo, which must develop an entirely new root system. Others feel that keeping the soil moist is sufficient. Either way it is essential to keep the plant hydrated until such time that the plants become established. You can tell if the plant is still alive by checking the canes to see if they are still pliable and have a greenish color to them. Containerized plants should become established at a much faster rate than bare root plants.

MAINTENANCE

Ocotillos should not require too much in the way of maintenance. Checking the soil moisture is the most important item. Ocotillos do not require any supplemental fertilization. Nutrient deficiencies are unheard of on properly irrigated plants. Pruning should be limited to the removal of dead or broken branches. If a cane requires removal it should be cut at the bottom of the trunk as the canes will readily sprout where the pruning wound occurs. Cutting at an incorrect height will create an odd looking specimen that will ruin the natural appearance. Ocotillos should never be sheared.

Ocotillos are not prone to insects or disease once established. Occasionally a young plant will succumb to root rot if over watered. Older plants are susceptible to borers if heavily stressed with drought. Most other problems can be avoided through deep, infrequent irrigation and allowing the soil to drain thoroughly between irrigation cycles.

PLEASE CALL FOR PRICING AND AVAILABILITY.

IMPORTANT NOTICE!

Effective immediately the Will-Call Yard will be located at the Luke Nursery location. We will no longer conduct Will-Call operations at the Glendale location. Please continue to send requests for will-call to the same numbers 623-247-8509 for call-ins and 623-247-6354 for faxes. Our staff members will handle all orders and Silverio will have them ready for pickup at the Luke yard located on Northern Avenue just east of Litchfield Road.

