

# PLANTS FOR THE LAKE TAHOE BASIN



## Western Columbine

*(Aquilegia formosa)*

### USES OF WESTERN COLUMBINE

Plant western columbine to attract wildlife to your garden. It is a perfect addition to a butterfly garden, and will entice hummingbirds and bees with its tubular red flowers. Allow the flowers to set seeds because they are a favorite food of small birds.

### DESCRIPTION AND GROWTH CHARACTERISTICS

Western columbine is an erect perennial forb that grows well in partial sun or shade. It also tolerates full sun with regular water. It occurs in moist open woods, banks, and seeps throughout the Pacific Northwest and California from 4,000 feet up to 9,000 feet in elevation. Growing 2 to 3 feet tall and 18 inches wide, western columbine has blue green lacy foliage with divided leaves that resemble maidenhair fern. The nodding red and yellow flowers (up to 2 inches across) have backward projecting, nectar-bearing spurs. They grow well in a variety of soils; provided they are well-drained (they will not tolerate soggy soil).

### ESTABLISHMENT AND CARE

Western columbine bloom in spring and early summer. Dead-head or cut back old stems for a second crop of flowers. Do not remove spent flowers at the end of the summer; instead, allow them to produce seeds. This will encourage seedling growth for the next season and provide food for small birds. Only deadhead the faded flowers if you do not want volunteer seedlings to grow the next season.

Avoid planting in windy areas or in compacted soils. Throughout the season, keep the soil moist at all times by saturating the soil to a depth of 8 to 10 inches. Add lots of organic matter like compost or peat moss. Applying a 2 inch layer of mulch (shredded leaves or dried grass clippings) around the plant each spring will help retain soil moisture and discourage weed growth.

Container plants establish rapidly and should be planted in the fall or in the spring after the danger of frost has passed, which in the Tahoe Basin is typically mid-June. If the soil in the container is dry, soak it and let it drain overnight before planting. Carefully remove the plant from the container so as not to break the root ball. Dig a hole that is twice as wide and six



inches deeper than the container. When the native soil is rich in humus (organic material), mix a small amount of compost or slow release organic fertilizer in the base of the hole to help the roots become established.

(continued on back)

For more information contact your local conservation district:

#### **In California:**

Tahoe Resource Conservation District  
530.543.1501 ext. 113  
info@tahoercd.org

#### **In Nevada:**

Nevada Tahoe Conservation District  
775.586.1610 ext. 28  
bcp@ntcd.org

# PLANTS FOR THE LAKE TAHOE BASIN



If the soil is poor in organic material, pre-mix the backfill soil with 50% native soil and 50% stable compost. When planting with compost, additional fertilizer is not needed. Plant at the same depth as the container, and make sure the root crown is level with the surrounding soil surface. Tamp the soil at the base of the planting hole to keep the plant from settling after the planting depth has been set. Backfill the hole half way with soil and then fill with water. The water will help settle and firm the soil around roots, eliminating air spaces and providing good root to soil contact. After the water has drained, finish backfilling the hole such that the upper level of back filled soil is even with the soil surface. When completed, the root crown should be level with the solid soil surface. Form a shallow watering basin around the plant by building a ridge of soil around the edge of the hole. This will contain the water and allow for a deeper penetration of the water. During dry summer months, water columbine at the base of the plant in the morning. If the foliage is wet overnight, it may be susceptible to mildew.



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