

PLANTS FOR THE LAKE TAHOE BASIN



Western Blue Flax

(*Linum lewisii*)

USES OF WESTERN BLUE FLAX

Western blue flax retains moisture, stays green throughout the fire season and is drought tolerant. This flax is a low fire hazard species. Flax seeds are a food source for birds in the fall and winter. These plants provide cover for small bird species and the short-lived blue flowers attract butterflies.

Flax is one of the oldest cultivated plants, valued for its fibrous stems that were used to make linen cloth. Various native peoples used the strong, flexible stems as a multi-purpose thread to construct fishing nets, snowshoes and baskets. Flax has also been used for medicinal purposes. Linseed oil, used in linoleum and varnishes, can be obtained from cultivated flax seeds.

DESCRIPTION AND GROWTH CHARACTERISTICS

Western blue flax is a short-lived herbaceous perennial that can be found from Alaska to California in coniferous forest openings and among aspen communities. It thrives in the well-drained soils of the Tahoe Basin. Western blue flax grows 8 inches to 2 feet tall and has small, narrow, alternate

leaves that lack stalks. It blooms for six weeks from mid May through August, with many blue flowers produced on drooping branches at the stem tips. The flowers close in the evening, and the five petals of each flower only last a day or two.

ESTABLISHMENT AND CARE

Western blue flax is very easy to grow and care for because it seeds easily, requires low to moderate amounts of water, and needs no fertilizer. Plant in an open, sunny area or in partial shade and avoid sites with compacted soils. Mix with other native wildflowers and plant two feet apart, allowing space for the plants to grow over time. In early spring or after the snow melts, remove flower stalks by clipping brown foliage. 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. The roots should be extended so that they are not in a curled or twisted position. 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
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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 backfilled 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.

To retain moisture, add a two inch layer of mulch (shredded leaves or bark) around each plant and again in spring when the ground thaws. Keep mulch slightly away from the base of the plants to avoid rot.



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