

UCCE Master Gardeners of Lake Tahoe Tahoe Trees & Plants

Mountain Delphinium --*Delphinium glaucum*

Mountain delphiniums are the largest of the Sierra larkspurs, having robust, leafy stems that grow from 3 to 6 feet tall. They grow in lightly shaded areas of coniferous forests in rich soggy soils of wet meadows along streambanks and near ponds. Mountain delphiniums are common in the Sierra Nevada and other mountainous areas from Southern California, north to Alaska and east to the Rocky Mountains. They are most commonly found between elevations of 5,000 and 10,600 feet. Leaves are rounded, 3 to 5 inches across and deeply split into 5-7 toothed segments.

Mountain delphinium flowers are blue to deep purple, and depending upon their elevation, flowers can be seen from July through September. The flowers cluster on the top 4 to 16 inches of the stems. Delphiniums are easy to recognize because of the peculiar shape of the flower. Each flower has 5 petal-like sepals (surrounding the petals), with the upper sepal lengthened into a spur.

The name delphinium comes from the Greek delphinion which is derived from the Greek work delphis, meaning dolphin, which alludes to the shape of the flower of some species of delphiniums.



Mountain delphiniums may be available as container grown plants, or if not, they can be grown from seeds or cuttings. Plant delphiniums in an area receiving light afternoon shade in soils enriched with compost, however, if kept moist, they will grow in full sun. Harvest the tiny, brownish-purple seeds as soon as seed pods become dry and either plant immediately, or store in airtight containers in a refrigerator. Fresh seeds germinate adequately, but germinations may be improved if seeds are first cold stratified.

Plant seeds in the fall for natural overwinter stratification, or place seeds in a plastic bag with moist peatmoss or vermiculite in a refrigerator for 3 to 5 months and sow seeds outdoors in March or April. Seeds can be broadcast directly on the ground, but will germinate better if the seedbed has been spaded with liberal amounts of compost to a depth of 8 to 10 inches. Mix seeds with fine sand and scatter them evenly over the seedbed. Lightly rake and water the area. Cover seeds with sand or weedfree compost to a depth equal to 1 or 2 times the diameter of the seed. Keep the seedbed moist by sprinkling 2 to 3 times daily until seeds germinate.

After germination, water deeply every day for the next few weeks, and then water two times a week for the following month. Continue to water once a week through the fall. Apply a 1 to 2 inch layer of organic mulch to reduce the need for frequent watering and to provide winter protection.

Once plants are established, they will need deep soakings weekly especially during dry weather. Plants from seeds bloom the second growing season. Tall flower stalks may need staking to prevent wind damage. Mountain delphinium can also be started from cuttings taken from early summer growth. Cut a 3 to 6 inch sprout with a sharp knife, making the bottom cut on an angle. Pinch off flowers and flower buds and remove the lower leaves from the cutting and apply rooting hormone. Make a hole with a pencil into a rooting medium of potting soil, vermiculite, or compost, and insert the cutting. Cover planted cuttings with plastic to prevent wilting until they are rooted. Keep the rooting bed shaded and moist, but not soggy, and between 70 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

Tall mountain delphiniums make an attractive addition to the flower garden. They are especially suited for naturalizing meadows and sites most other plants find too wet and shady.

Information from: Plants for the Lake Tahoe Basin. University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, Western Area Cooperative Extension, Nevada Tahoe Conservation District, Tahoe Resource Conservation District, and Soil Conservation Service-USDA.