

Red Osier Dogwood

University of California
Agriculture and Natural Resources



UCCE Master Gardener Program

Tahoe Trees & Plants: Highlight on Red Osier Dogwood - *Cornus stolnifera*



Red osier dogwood, also known as American dogwood, is widely distributed throughout the western states. It is commonly found along stream banks, shorelines of lakes and other moist areas in the montane coniferous forest. Within the Lake Tahoe Basin it is generally associated with alders and willows.

Red osier dogwood is a deciduous widely spreading shrub which generally reaches heights between 5 and 15 feet. It is a colorful shrub with its deep green foliage during the spring and summer months and brilliant red fall colors. The smooth purplish to reddish stems provide color throughout the winter months long after

the leaves have dropped.

The leaves, 2-4 inches long, are oval to elliptical in shape. In the late spring numerous white to cream colored flowers are borne in small round topped clusters. The clusters are generally 2 inches wide. The flowers give rise to clusters of white berry-like fruit in the mid to late summer.

Red osier dogwood may be propagated from either seed, vegetative cuttings or suckers. Seed may be collected during the early fall months. Seed may be directly planted and allowed to “over winter” in the soil. However, for better results seed should be pretreated by cold stratification to break dormancy and sown in the spring when soil temperature and moisture are more favorable.

Stratification may be accomplished by mixing the seeds in moist sand and storing them in plastic bags in the refrigerator for 3 to 6 months. Seeds should be planted approximately 1 to 1.5 inches deep in well-drained soils in sunny locations. Watering requirements will vary with the weather, nature of the soil and the age of the plant.

Seedlings and younger plants may require weekly applications of water during the first couple growing seasons. Once plants become established less frequent applications of water will be necessary. However, if planted in dry locations periodic watering will be required as this plant is adapted to moist soils.

Container grown plants may be available from local nurseries. Such plants would allow for a more rapid establishment of red osier dogwood than any of the previous mention methods. Container

grown stock should be planted in holes which are twice as wide and 6 inches deeper than the root mass. The roots should be positioned so that they are not curled or twisted. Backfill the hole half way with soil and then fill with water.

The water will help settle and firm the soil around the roots eliminating air spaces and provide good root-soil contact. After the water has drained, finish backfilling the hole such that the upper level is even with the soil surface. Tamp the soil to eliminate air pockets and prevent settlement.

When completed, the root collar should be level with the solid soil surface. Form a shallow saucer 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.

Watering deeply will allow water to penetrate below existing roots and will encourage deeper root growth. Applying a mulch around the plant will help retain the soil moisture and thus reduce the watering requirement.

Red osier dogwood is an excellent plant for erosion control on moist sites such as stream banks and shoreline or on sites where additional irrigation can be provided. It is a rapid and vigorously growing plant which forms thickets from its spreading surface and underground stolons.

Additionally, the seasonal colors of the foliage and stems make it an attractive ornamental for landscape plans. Berries of red osier dogwood provide a food source for a variety of birds in the Lake Tahoe Basin

Information provided by: Plants for the Lake Tahoe Basin, Natural Resource Conservation Service