



CARE AND PLANTING OF OCOTILLOS

STARNOTE 415
June 2009

Success with wild-collected Plants

Ocotillos (*Fouquieria splendens*) are among the most exotic and lovely of the plants from the western Sonoran Desert and Baja California, with snaky cactus-like limbs (whips) and blazing scarlet flowers. Each spring, and after summer rains, the whips suddenly sprout small green leaves along their whole length. Leaves may remain for several weeks before turning yellow and falling off. Fortunately for gardeners in the Southwest, Ocotillo collected from the wild are capable of re-establishing themselves in landscapes, given certain conditions:

Nursery Grown Ocotillos

Wild-Collected Ocotillos

When to Transplant

Soil Drainage

Pre-Planting Watering

Guy-Wire "Staking"

Irrigation Systems

Misting

Slow to Establish Roots

Fertilizer

Pruning

Pests

- **Nursery Grown Ocotillos** - Nursery grown Ocotillos do not require a State Authorization tag. Because of the regulations regarding wild-collected specimens, it might be a good idea to save your receipt when you purchase an Ocotillo from a Nursery.
- **Wild-Collected Ocotillos** - All wild-collected Ocotillos from Arizona and California must have authorized State collection tags. It is illegal to sell or purchase collected plants without these tags. The tags are designed to show tampering, and should be intact when you purchase the plant. Plants collected from Texas do not need tags. Once planted, the tag can be removed, but should be kept to prove that your plant is not illegally collected. Purchase plants from reputable dealers and know their places of origin. Be wary of pickup truck and street corner vendors. [\(top\)](#)
- **When to Transplant** - Ocotillos can be transplanted from the wild at any time of the year. There does not seem to be a significant difference in the re-establishment rate of large and small plants. Plants can also be increased by burying cuttings until they root. In some areas, living fence enclosures are often created in this way.
 - Replant Ocotillos in the same season they were dug.

- Specimens which aren't permanently planted right away should be temporarily planted in dry sand, either upright or at an angle, or laying flat with sand covering the entire plant. Plants can withstand having their roots exposed for a month or more, although this can affect re-establishment. [\(top\)](#)
- **Soil Drainage** - Excellent drainage is necessary. Ocotillos do not grow at the bottoms of most valleys for this reason. Make sure that the new planting location either drains well to begin with or is made to drain well by amending soil with sand and gravel or by using raised mounds. A large hole is not necessary if the soil drains well naturally, but should be dug if heavy clay is encountered. Organic soil amendment is not necessary. Large rocks should be removed prior to planting. [\(top\)](#)
- **Pre-Planting Watering** - The planting hole should be filled with water and allowed to drain before planting. Not only does this create a good environment for re-establishment, but it allows you to double-check the drainage. The hole should drain completely within 2-3 hours. Place plant in the hole and backfill with native or mineral-amended soil. Create a volcano-like depression, known as a watering basin, in a 2-3 foot radius from the trunk. Water the plant thoroughly with a solution of *Dr. Q's® Plant Tonic* and water. [\(top\)](#)
- **Guy-Wire "Staking"** - Larger plants may require stabilization until they root firmly. Use guy-wires connected to stakes in the ground, attached to main whips or limbs with an expandable, non-abrasive connector like *Black Spring Tree Tie* or *Stretch Tie*. Do not use a single stake, which may blow over with the plant in a strong wind.
- **Irrigation Systems** - Ocotillos generally do not better when not connected to an automatic irrigation system initially. The roots are not yet able to draw up water and nutrients. Provide an overhead spray of water onto the canes until they are saturated and water has begun to accumulate at the base once to three times a week for the first summer. A plant is said to be established after it resumes growth, usually in the next spring after planting. Supplement sparse rains by giving established plants a good soaking every month or so after established. [\(top\)](#)
- **Misting** - Many experts recommend a light misting of the entire plant every few days during the first summer, to prevent it from drying out. This treatment is very beneficial for the first summer or if a particularly hot and windy period follows transplanting.
- **Slow to Establish Roots** - Ocotillos are sometimes slow to establish, sometimes taking up to two years to begin active growth again. On the other hand, some plants have been known to bloom while stacked horizontally in bare root piles. All in all, the plant is a very hardy one, and the majority of transplants will re-establish in time. Prior to root establishment, misting is the primary method for watering. [\(top\)](#)
- **Fertilizer** - Ocotillos do not need supplemental fertilizer. Some use a mild fertilizer like *Fish Emulsion* or *Dr. Q's® Desert Plant & Cactus Food* once a year, which sometimes results in fast, lush growth. Too much fertilization can discourage blooming and cause overly tall, unbranched plants.

- **Pruning** - If necessary to prune Ocotillo whips, don't do it halfway. Remove entire whip at base of plant.
- **Pests** - The cultivated Ocotillo is not plagued by significant pests or diseases once established. If you have questions, visit www.starnursery.com or your local Star Nursery . You can also contact the County Cooperative Extension. Remember that the Ocotillo is a highly seasonal plant, losing and gaining leaves several times during the year. Don't be upset if your plant is bare much of the time.
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