

Hawthorns

Hawthorns of Colorado

Hawthorns grow as shrubs, dense thickets, or small trees in Colorado, all with white flowers in clusters, reddish fruit, and thorns, in mountain canyons, valleys, and on stream banks, from 5000 to 8500 feet (1500 to 2500 m) in elevation. Long slender thorns are $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 inches (1 to 5 cm) long, with no buds or leaves on thorns. Fruit may remain on for months.

The maximum height is 20 feet (6 m) or a little more. Hawthorns often grow in tangled masses in stream bottoms, and birds choose these protected places them for nesting sites. The fruit is eaten by birds, foxes, rabbits, and deer. The thorns are more common on young growth; large older branches have few thorns. This may be an adaptation to provide more protection for the smaller plants. The hawthorns are quick to reproduce but slow-growing.

The name *Crataegus* is from the ancient Greek *kratos* for strength, and refers to the wood which is hard and suitable for making small tough objects such as walking sticks.

Identification

Leaves: about an inch (2.5 cm) wide and two inches (5 cm) long; oval, elliptical, or lance-shaped; alternate; toothed; lobed ends, dark green. Leaf stalk length $\frac{2}{5}$ to $1 \frac{1}{4}$ inch (10 to 30 cm) long. Small black dots on edge of leaves.

Fruit: $\frac{1}{5}$ to $\frac{2}{5}$ inch (5 to 10 cm) in diameter; hard; red to reddish purple or black.

Stems: sometimes glossy brown or yellowish, to light orange-brown; tough, zig-zag.

Thorns: sharp, without buds attached. $\frac{3}{4}$ to 3 inches (20 to 75 mm) in length; red or black, on both twigs and old wood.

Flowers: abundant, appear at end of twigs, 5 petals, white or pink.

Bark: dark red or shiny red, to brown or gray, scaly or with shallow furrows.

Many hawthorn species, individual variation of plants, and hybrids mean that species identification is difficult. The U.S. Department of Agriculture PLANTS database lists 210 species of hawthorn in the U.S., but only four species in Colorado:

Fireberry hawthorn, *Crataegus chrysocarpa*

Cerro hawthorn, *Crataegus erythropoda*

River hawthorn, *Crataegus rivularis*



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Fleshy Hawthorn, *Crataegus succulenta*

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