

Hawthorns of Colorado

There are three kinds of Hawthorn trees native to Colorado, all growing as shrubs or small trees with white flowers, reddish fruit, and thorns, in mountain canyons, valleys, and on stream banks, on sites from 5000 to 8500 feet in elevation.

The Hawthorns are quick to reproduce but slow-growing. The maximum height is 20 feet (6 m) or a little more. Hawthorns often grow in tangled masses in stream bottoms, and birds prefer 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 tree-sized Hawthorns of Colorado are:

River Hawthorn (*Crataegus rivularis* Nuttall):

A shrub or small tree of northwestern Colorado, the San Luis Valley and North Park, and the most common Hawthorn of western slope streams. Thorns few, slender, about an inch long, black, curled, and glossy. Leaves about an inch (2.5 cm) wide and two inches (5 cm) long, very finely and sharply toothed. Fruits red to dark red or black and to 2/5 inch (10 mm) in diameter.

Shiny-leaved, Cerro, or Red-based Hawthorn (*Crataegus erythropoda*):

Usually found on dry hillsides and canyons of the eastern slope up to 8000 feet (2500 m) elevation, and widely distributed in the western counties.

Flowers and fruits in a raceme: along a single strand. Fruits dark reddish-purple, brown, or black, 1/4 inch (6 mm) long, and hard.; thorns morocco-red, about an inch long, sometimes short or lacking. Twigs are light orange-brown. Bark has light orange-brown areas. Leaves shiny and slightly lobed.

Fleshy Hawthorn or western big-thorn Hawthorn (*Crataegus succulenta*):

Thorns over 1 1/2 inch (35 mm) long; brown or orange-brown. Fruits bright red. Flowers and fruit in a flat-topped cluster. Usually found close to streams on the outermost eastern foothills of the Rockies and widely scattered on the western slope.

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. Other shrubby Hawthorn grow in Colorado but do not reach tree size (species *succulenta*, *saligna*, and *chrysocarpa*).

Identification

Leaves: oval, elliptical, or lance-shaped; alternate; toothed; lobed ends, dark green. Leaf stalk length



Hawthorns

2/5 to 1 1/4 inch (10 to 30 cm) long. Small black dots on edge of leaves.

Fruit: 1/5 to 2/5 inch (5 to 10 cm) in diameter; red to reddish purple or black.

Stems: sometimes glossy brown or yellowish, tough, zig-zag.

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

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.

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Drawing of fleshy hawthorn: USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Britton, N.L., and A. Brown. 1913. *An illustrated flora of the northern United States, Canada and the British Possessions*. 3 vols. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. Vol. 2: 301.