

UCCE Master Gardeners of Lake Tahoe Tahoe Trees & Plants

Sulfur Flower, Buckwheat – *Eriogonum umbellatum*



Sulfur flower, Buckwheat is a low-growing woody perennial, commonly found on hot dry sunny exposures on rocky slopes and ridges throughout the west. It is native to western mountainous regions at elevations of 2,500 to 10,000 feet. Sulfur flower, Buckwheat requires well-drained, sandy or gravelly soils with low fertility, and will not tolerate saturated soils.

The plant forms low, broad mats, with individual clumps reaching one foot height to two feet across. Leaves are one inch long, shiny green on top and woolly underneath. Flower stems 3 inches to 16 inches tall are topped by clusters of tiny sulfur-yellow flower heads. Flowers range from yellow to orange or reddish, both in bloom and in mature seed heads. Flower displays can color entire slopes starting in June at lower elevations and continue into August at higher elevations.

The common name of buckwheat comes from the Dutch word boekweit or the German buckweizen. Both mean “beech wheat,” so called because sulfur flower’s 3 sided seed resembles the beech nut, a seed used to make buckwheat flour.

Sulfur flower, Buckwheat can be raised from seed, or purchased as container grown plants at local nurseries. Collect the sharply angled small black seeds from dried flower heads by rubbing the papery dried flower heads between your fingers. They generally germinate without pretreatment and can be sown in spring or fall; however the rate of germination is improved if they are first cold-stratified.

Cold stratify seeds by placing them in a plastic bag with moist peatmoss or sand in a refrigerator for three months. Plant out in the early spring. Seeds are naturally cold stratified by fall planting. Select a hot, sunny, well-drained planting site and broadcast the seeds directly on the ground where they are to grow permanently.

Sulfur flower, Buckwheat has a long tap root and thus mature plants are difficult to transplant. Sulfur flower Buckwheat seeds will germinate better if the seedbed has been cleared of weeds, and/or rototilled or spaded to a depth of eight to ten inches, and mixed with additional compost. Scatter seeds evenly over the seedbed and rake and water lightly. Cover seeds with sand or weed-free compost to a depth equal to one or two times the seed diameter (about one-eighth inch).

Keep the seedbed moist by sprinkling two to three times daily until seeds germinate. After the seeds germinate, continue to water once every two to three days for the next few weeks; then once a week for another month. Continue to water a few times a month through the fall. Plants are drought tolerant when established and will need only occasional watering.

Sulfur flower, Buckwheat blooms the second year from seed. It can be pruned back after flowering to promote denser, more compact plant.



When container grown plants are ready to plant, dig a hole two to three times the diameter of the rootball and at least six inches deeper. With six inches of native soil backfill the hole. Make a few one-eighth inch deep vertical cuts in the rootball, or carefully “tease” roots away from the rootball with your hands to encourage roots to grow into the new soil. Set the plant into the hole and fill in around the roots with planting mix, firming the soil with your hands as you fill, until the hole is half full. Fill the hole with water and allow it to settle. This will settle the soil and eliminate air pockets around the roots. Backfill with enough soil so the plant will settle at the same level it was growing at in the container. Water to allow the soil to settle, and then add more soil if necessary. Build a berm of soil to form a watering basin around the outer edge of the hole. Break the basin down after two or three years.

Sulfur flower, Buckwheat plants withstand sun, heat, drought and wind, making them ideal plants for dry sunny slopes. The showy flowers and seed heads, and compact growth habit make this plant a good choice for rock gardens. Bees produce a strong, dark honey from sulfur flower nectar. The seeds are important food source for many species of birds and small mammals. Quail, grouse, deer and mountain sheep eat their leaves.

Information from: Plant 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.