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Breynia disticha: Snowbush, Hawaiian Snowbush, Snow-on the-Mountain[1]

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Introduction

Snowbush is a vase-shaped evergreen shrub that is used primarily for its attractive foliage. This plant reaches a height of 2 to 10 feet and spread of 3 to 6 feet (Figure 1). Snowbush has ovate foliage that may be white, green, red, pink, or variegated in coloration. Plants appear to differ in foliage coloration with some showing almost pink to red new growth and others with a white and green variegation. The simple leaves are somewhat two-ranked and could appear to be pinnately compound at first glance. The red branches of this shrub are slender, wiry and appear to zig-zag (Figure 2). Snowbush has inconspicuous green, petal-less flowers that occur in axillary clusters on long peduncles (Figures 3 and 4); the flowers are often overlooked due to their location and the striking foliage of the plant. Various cultivars exist with interestingly colored foliage and compact growth forms. Snowbush is well-suited for use in a container or above-ground planter, as a specimen or border, or as an informal hedge.



Figure 1. Full form—*Breynia disticha*: snowbush.
Credit: © stephaniemessler914, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist



Figure 2. Leaf—*Breynia disticha*: snowbush.
Credit: Nicholas J. Klein via Adobe Stock



Figure 3. Flower—*Breynia disticha*: snowbush.
Credit: Ryan Fessenden



Figure 4. Flower—*Breynia disticha*: snowbush.
Credit: Ryan Fessenden

General Information

Scientific name: *Breynia disticha*

Other name(s): *Phyllanthus nivosus* (synonym)

Pronunciation: BRAY-nee-uh DISS-stick-uh

Common name(s): snowbush, snow-on-the-mountain, Hawaiian snowbush

Family: *Phyllanthaceae*

Plant type: shrub

USDA hardiness zones: 9B through 11B (Figures 5 and 6)

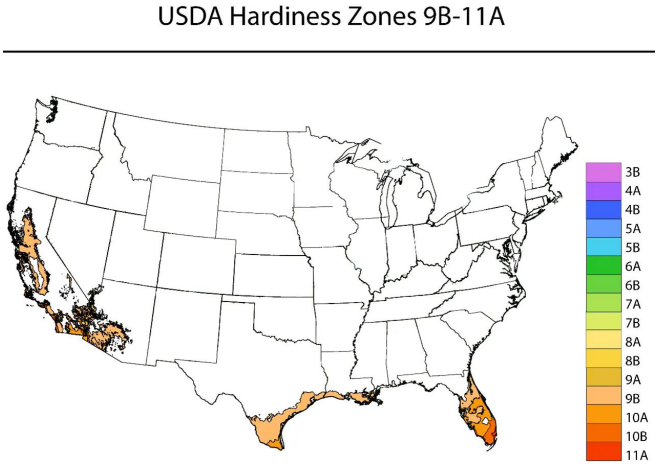


Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting zone—USDA Hardiness Zones 9B–11A; 11B within planting zone but not included on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/ for specific zone information.

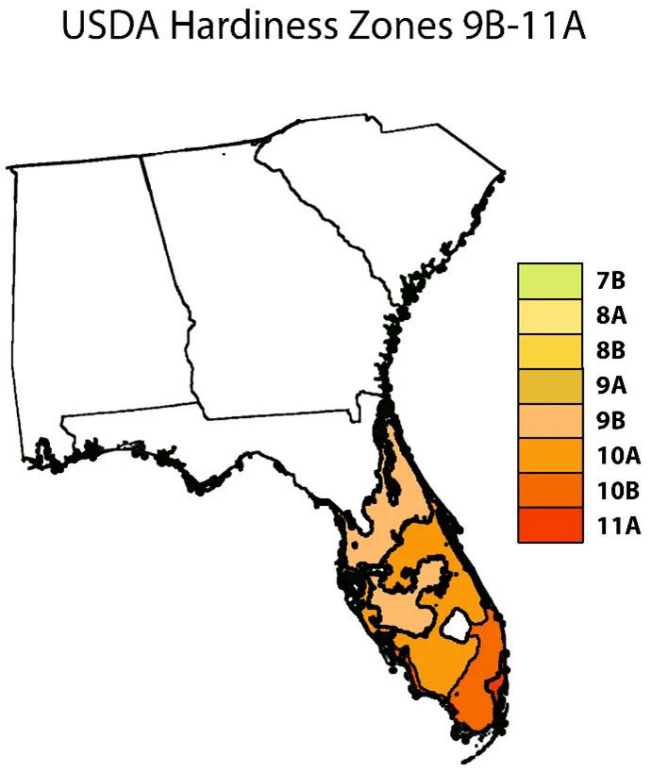


Figure 6. Shaded area represents potential planting zone in the SE Region—USDA Hardiness Zones 9B–11A; 11B included on planting zone but not included on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/ for specific zone information.

Planting month for zones 10 and 11: year-round

Origin: not native to North America

Uses: specimen; superior hedge; suitable for growing indoors; border; foundation; mass planting; container

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant

Description

Height: 2 to 10 feet

Spread: 3 to 6 feet

Plant habit: vase shaped

Plant density: moderate

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: ovate; obovate

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches

Leaf color: green; white; pink; red; variegated

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white

Flower characteristic: summer flowering; fall flowering; inconspicuous

Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: less than .5 inch

Fruit cover: fleshy

Fruit color: white

Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; not particularly showy

Current year stem/twig color: reddish

Current year stem/twig thickness: thin

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in full sun; plant grows in partial shade

Soil tolerances: acidic; slightly alkaline; sand; loam

Drought tolerance: moderate

Soil salt tolerances: poor

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: sprouts from roots or lower trunk

Winter interest: colorful evergreen foliage adds winter interest

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

Use and Management

This shrub may be used as a specimen, and it also forms a nice hedge. Given enough room to expand its canopy, a single, unpruned specimen forms an attractive vase shape. It can also make for an accent in a shrub border. Branches are flexible enough to drape over a wall.

Snowbush will grow well on a wide range of soils but requires a full sun position in the landscape to maintain dense growth. Full sun causes variegation and coloration to be more intense. Plants may also be in partial shade, but the plant may experience leggy growth. This plant is tolerant of light, sandy soils but will not tolerate salt.

Propagation is by cuttings and sucker divisions.

Design Considerations

Snowbush brings a soft, fine-textured look to the landscape with its informal appeal. It is a staple in informal garden designs, prized for its airy structure and the striking pink, white, and green mottling on its new growth. Use it as a single accent plant where its unique coloration can be appreciated up close, or mass it in groups for a full, layered effect. Allow the plant to grow into its natural, arching form rather than shearing it into a rigid shape, which would disrupt its delicate appearance. Pair snowbush with plants that offer contrasting forms or complementary colors. Lady palm provides a dark green backdrop that makes the pink and white variegation pop. For textural contrast, consider the fine, strappy leaves of liriope or the blue-gray foliage and flowers of Blue Daze, which can be planted at its base.

Pests and Diseases

Pest issues (minor) include caterpillars and mites. No diseases of major concern.

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