

# Planning a Heather Garden

By Kathy Wolfe  
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## Make a stunning year-round display

The dark winter months can be a good time to evaluate our overall garden design. Could your yard use some extra color and texture to add pop throughout the seasons? If so, you might consider planting heathers in your landscape or devoting a sunny spot to a mixed heather garden which, when planned correctly, gives year-round color, is evergreen with lovely texture, is mostly winter hardy and deer resistant, and will be low maintenance once established.

Heathers (the name commonly used for both heathers and heaths) belong to the *Ericaceae* family but are botanically different. They are divided into three separate genera, each with different uses and attributes which are important to understand before choosing your plant combinations.

True heathers are of the species *Calluna vulgaris* which include over 800 cultivar forms. Sometimes known as Scotch Heather or Ling Heather, these are the natives of the moors of Scotland and England. Stems have tiny overlapping scale-like leaves and plants flower from late July to early November in shades ranging from white through pink, red, blue and purple. Winter foliage can turn gold, red, orange or purple for added dimension in all seasons. True heathers offer the most variety in plant shape as well, growing bushy, prostrate or upright, and are the hardiest of the heather types.

True heaths belong in the *Erica* genus of which there are 700 species and countless less hardy cultivars. Their pink, red or white winter flowers can add punch to an otherwise sparse landscape. Foliage is finer than that of true heathers and more needle-like in texture. Hardiness ranges widely so be sure to do your research before purchasing. Avoid plants with “Mediterranean” or “Mexican” in their name because they will not be as hardy as needed in the Pacific Northwest.

The third small genus is the *Daboecia* (sometimes called Irish Heath). This low-growing or dwarf plant has rich, green foliage and relatively large bell-shaped flowers which bloom spring through fall and can tolerate partial shade.

Massing heather types together can make a beautiful display. When planning a heather garden, begin by making an outline of your area. If you are planning a border, start from the back with the taller plants and move forward. If the bed is to be viewed from all sides, begin your design from the center out.

Research combinations that you find pleasing by visiting demonstration gardens and local nurseries, checking out websites for heather societies, looking at mail order catalogs and books from your library.



An array of colorful heathers can instantly add color to your garden. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.*

Group heathers in odd numbers of three or more for best impact. With all the bloom color variabilities, gardeners can sometimes be overwhelmed, but be assured that most combinations are quite harmonious. It is more important to focus on foliage display, plant size, season of bloom and spacing.

Consider hardscape additions to your plan by including large rocks, stepping stones or even tree stumps for interest. Dwarf conifers are good companion plants, as they grow upwards and can supply a vertical accent and color contrast. They make a good divider to separate heathers of different types.

Heathers can be added to small gardens with great effect. They work wonderfully in beds and borders and make useful container plants, especially those that bloom in winter. In combination with rhododendron and azaleas, *Pieris japonica*, bulb groupings, lavender or many other perennials, heathers can add texture and extend garden color throughout the year.

Although some *Ericas* can tolerate pH of 7.5 or above, most heathers prefer pH levels of 6.5 or less. All require good drainage, high organic soil and at least six hours of full sun per day to maximize color. Slopes, rock gardens or raised beds ensure good drainage.



**Photo Above Left:** Calluna Vulgaris, “Con Brio” (left) and Calluna Vulgaris, “Lime Glade” (right).  
**Photo Above Right:** Calluna vulgaris, “Dark Beauty”, bursts with color. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.*

Buy plants that are compact with healthy foliage. Leave some space between plants for them to mature and promote good air circulation. Check the specifics on the label and add a couple of inches. Try staging your heather pots before planting to determine how the final bed will look.

Plant in spring or early autumn, following the label instructions and placing the root ball level with the soil surface. You may want to add chopped up leaves or garden compost to enrich the soil, but avoid manure (too nutrient rich) and mushroom compost (too sweet). Heathers prefer lean soil so add only one dose of rhododendron food to jumpstart your initial planting then leave them alone. Water new plantings twice a week for the first few months to begin rapid, vigorous growth. Once established after two or three seasons, the plants can take care of themselves.

In early spring, after snow melts, prune summer blooming heather below last year’s flowers, shearing off up to one third of the plant, if necessary. Winter bloomers should be pruned after their flowers have faded. This is a must because once the blossoms drop off, the bare spot that remains never fills in with new growth and your plant will become leggy.

Now you can think beyond the vision of the wild heather of the moors which provided bedding for goats, cattle and sheep, food for grouse and roofing material for man. Today heather and heath are used as decorative plants that, when mixed in groupings or with other perennials and shrubs, provide a year-round display of foliage and bloom color which can be truly stunning.

## **RESOURCES:**

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