

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener

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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

You're looking at those new plant catalogues coming in the mail. Or maybe, you've found ideas in a magazine that would look great in your garden. Unfortunately, there are considerations other than beauty when we make our plant selections. In general, one of the more important considerations is the growing zone. In many plant descriptions it is written as "Z 4-6" or "zone 4-8" and often there is no other explanation. Exactly what does that mean?

There are three major growing zone maps used by gardeners. The first and most widely used was created about 40 years ago. It is the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Hardiness Zone Map. This is the zone map referred to on most plant tags. The USDA zones are based on minimum cold temperatures. It indicates the coldest temperatures at which a plant will survive. It includes 11 zones, and 9 sub-zones. Each zone differs by 10 degrees. Skagit County zones range from zone 5 in the mountains to zone 8 along the water. You can find the USDA zone map at the US National Arboretum website www.usna.usda.gov. Plants that are not hardy at or below your zone may not survive the winter.

Another map is the *Sunset's Western Garden Book Climate Zones*. This map was based on a variety of information including summer high temperatures and winters lows, elevation, ocean and mountain influence, rainfall, humidity, aridity, and growing seasons. The map is only for the 11 states west of the Continental Divide. According to this map, Anacortes is in zone 5, Mt Vernon is zone 4, and Marblemount is zone 1A. This map along with some plant descriptions and which zone they are in may be found on the Sunset website at www.sunset.com (search for "climate zones").

Each of the maps has their shortcomings. The USDA map, used widely, puts the Olympics in the same zone as parts of the Sonora Desert. In the western United States, the weather comes from the Pacific Ocean. Here, summer heat, amount and duration of rain, humidity, seasonal winds, and hours of sunlight affect plant hardiness as much or more than winter cold. The *Sunset* map is very helpful, but without their book or website for reference, the information may not be quite as useful.

The best advice for gardeners is to be aware of and familiar with your zones based on the information from each of the maps. But remember, every garden also contain their own microclimates. A plant that is hardy down to zone 9 or 10 might be fine in your zone 8 garden if sheltered from the wind and placed along a south-facing wall. You may also grow plants that are not hardy to your zone by putting them in pots and bringing them inside during the winter. If a plant (usually seeds or bulbs) requires a period of cold your climate doesn't provide, you can chill it for the required time in your refrigerator. If the days get too hot, too often, try more shade in the afternoon heat and make absolutely sure you are giving adequate water. If you find a plant you love but it is not right for your zone, try it anyway with a clear consideration for its care and placement. Realize though, that in the end, nature is in charge of our gardens.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

Note: some references in this article have been updated since its initial publication.