

Heather

The Ericaceae family embraces rhododendrons, azaleas, blueberries, heathers and heaths. True heather refers to the genus *Calluna*, which has tailed leaves without a stalk. However, it is also used to cover the genera *Erica tetralix*, *E. x watsonii* and *E. carnea*, commonly known as heaths. The terms have become so generic that heather is commonly used to cover them all. If you want to be specific, heath has needles and heather has scaly foliage.

The name *Calluna* is from the Greek word kallunein, which means to cleanse. Heather twigs were used as brooms. It was also thought to have medicinal properties and was used in the treatment of internal disorders. Roofs were thatched with it and it was used as bedding. Ale was made from it. Heather is still commonplace on the moors of northern Europe where broad sweeps are visible as far as the eye can see. In your garden, plant heather in sweeps and masses around conifers and on hillsides. Bees and butterflies are attracted to the blossoms.

Typical heathers are low mounding evergreen shrubs with needlelike leaves and small, urn-shaped flowers. The foliage comes in shades of yellow, orange, red, gold, gray, purple, bronze, and the full spectrum of greens. Heather can be capricious, changing leaf color with the season. Flower colors range from white, to all shades of pink, purple and red you can imagine. The flowers can be double or single. Plant them in the spring or fall in full sun and well-drained acidic soil. They do not require fertilizer, but if the bloom loses color, give them a light feeding of acid plant food in early summer. Prune your heather immediately after it has finished blooming. There is a cultivar in bloom or with colored foliage every season of the year.

Calluna vulgaris 'Allegro' blooms from July to October. It is an upright plant with dark green foliage and ruby flowers. It will reach a height of 18 inches and a width of 24 inches.



Calluna vulgaris 'Arina' blooms from July to August. It is an upright plant with medium green foliage and lilac pink flowers. It will reach a height of 16 inches and a width of 24 inches. In the spring, the new growth is tipped with orange and cream.

Calluna vulgaris 'Blazeaway' blooms from August to September. It has gold foliage with lavender flowers. It will reach a height of 14 inches and a width of 24 inches. In the winter, the foliage becomes orange to fiery red.



Calluna vulgaris 'Flamingo' blooms from August to September. It has dark green foliage with lavender flowers. It will reach a height of 12 inches and a width of 20 inches. In the spring, the tips are pink to reddish in color.

Calluna vulgaris 'Reini' blooms from August to September. It has downy gray foliage with white flowers. It will reach a height of 18 inches and a width of 24 inches. In the winter, the tips of this plant are yellow



Calluna vulgaris 'Silver Knight' blooms from July to September. It has downy gray foliage in the summer with lavender flowers. It will reach a height of 20 inches and a width of 24 inches. In the winter, the foliage changes to a purple gray.

Calluna vulgaris 'Spring Cream' blooms from August to November. It has medium green foliage tipped with yellow and white flowers. It will reach a height of 14 inches and a width of 18 inches. In the spring the tips are cream colored.





Erica x darleyensis 'Mary Helen' blooms from February to April. It has yellow to gold foliage and pink flowers. It will reach a height of 10 inches and a width of 18 inches. In the winter, the foliage becomes a bronze red.

Erica x darleyensis 'Kramer's Rote' (Red) blooms from January to April. It has medium green foliage and magenta flowers. It will reach a height of 15 inches and a width of 24 inches. In the spring, it has cream tips.



Erica x Williamsii 'Gwavas' blooms from July to November. It has medium green foliage with shell pink flowers. It will reach a height of two inches and a width of 16 inches. In the spring, the tips are yellow.

[The Heather Society](#) maintains an informative website listing every cultivar's pertinent information. Included at the site is a garden design page. You can search for heathers on this page by species, cultivar name, flower type, flower color, flowering period, foliage, habit, height, spread, hardiness, and soil type. Of the 1277 cultivars in the database, 1244 are hardy to USDA zone 7. There are 79 compact prostrate, 34 open prostrate, 355 compact spreading, 176 open spreading, 292 compact erect and 350 open erect cultivars. In January 104 bloom, Feb. 148, Mar 177, Apr 156, May 120, Jun 210, Jul 415, Aug 922, Sep 935, Oct 446, Nov 155, and Dec 85. After you have exhausted all your searches, there is a blank space to plant your garden and see how it is going to look.

The [North American Heather Society](#) has information on local societies and nurseries that specialize in heather.

With the plethora of heather cultivars available, isn't this the year you should plant some?

References

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- Brenzel, Kathleen Norris. *Sunset Western Garden Book*, Menlo Park: Lane Publishing Co., 1988.
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- Michener, David and Nan Sinton. *Taylor's Guide to Ground Covers*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.