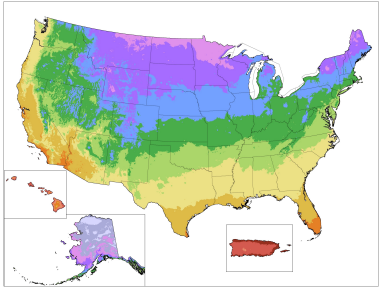




Mystified by Climate Zones? Here's the Real Dirt on Climate Zones.



If you are a little confused by plant catalogues or magazine articles describing climate zones? Well, join the crowd, you are not alone.

Here are the two primary climate zone maps that befuddle us. They are the USDA Plant Hardiness Zones and the Sunset Zone Guide.

The USDA plant hardiness map divides North America into 11 hardiness zones. Zone 1 is the coldest; zone 11 is the warmest. When you order plants from catalogs or read general garden books, you need to know your USDA zone in order to be able to interpret references correctly.

Gardeners in the western United States sometimes are confused when confronted with these 11 hardiness zones created by the USDA, because we are used to a 24-zone climate system created by Sunset Magazine. The Sunset zone maps, considered the standard gardening references in the West, are more precise than the USDA's, since they factor in not only winter minimum temperatures, but also summer highs, lengths of growing seasons, humidity, and rainfall patterns.

The 2012 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map compiled by the USDA and Oregon State University is the standard by which gardeners and growers can determine which plants are most likely to thrive at a generalized location. The map is based on the average annual minimum winter temperature, divided into 10-degree Fahrenheit zones. Since the earlier 1990 version, the zone boundaries have shifted in many areas. This new map is generally one 5-degree Fahrenheit and a half zone warmer than the previous map. This data has been accumulated over a 30 year period up to 2005 and was released in January of 2012.

For the first time, the USDA map is available as an interactive GIS-based map, for which a broadband Internet connection is recommended, and as static images for those with slower Internet access. Users may also simply type in a ZIP Code and find the hardiness zone for that area.

The Sunset Climate zone for gardening was determined by a system developed by Sunset Magazine in the mid-20th century. There are 24 Sunset Zones, divided by a number of factors to help gardeners identify the most appropriate plants for their needs. While initially developed for 13 western states, the Sunset Zone system has been expanded across the United States.

Several factors go into the determination of a Sunset Zone. Winter and summer highs and lows are considered to provide information about the temperature extremes in the region. In addition, weather patterns like humidity, rainfall, day length, wind, heat and soil types also play their roles. The Sunset Zones also get into details like prevailing winds. Many local nurseries indicate plant hardiness by Sunset Zone. Even within a city, a street, or a spot protected by a warm wall in your own garden, there may be microclimates that affect how plants grow. The zones are only a guide and a good starting point, but you still need to determine for yourself what will and won't work in your garden.

http://ucanr.edu/sites/gardenweb/Your_Climate_Zone/

<http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/Default.aspx>

<http://www.ahs.org/gardening-resources/gardening-maps/heat-zone-map>

Submitted by Michael-Anne Foley, UCCE Master Gardener of Glenn County