

The Press Democrat
March 9, 2024

ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS Breaking down climate zones to know where plants do best



Helpful tags like these used by Prickett's Nursery give important information about climate zones where a plant will thrive. Master Gardener Fay Mark/Prickett's Nursery.

Question: My husband bought a few plants at a nursery recently. There was a tag describing the USDA Climate Zone. I live in Sonoma 9a, but I saw other zones mentioned such as 9b and 10. There was also information about a Sunset Zone. What is the difference between them and how do I understand the tags?

Answer: For plants to thrive, understanding climate zone information is important. USDA data provides important information for your new selections. Sunset Climate Zone data is a bit more detailed, but either approach can help you determine what plants will do best in your local area.

USDA zone information uses average extreme minimum temperature data. If you live in an area that experiences frost each year, this information will help you determine the best time to plant. On the USDA webpage, enter your ZIP code to receive current updates about your specific area. In November 2023 the USDA updated its information to more accurately reflect current weather trends. Better technology,

including the use of additional weather stations, has enabled it to show a higher resolution of weather patterns. As a result, some areas were shifted into the next warmer half zone. When you purchase plants, double check the USDA website for your current location to verify the plant tag information is correct.

The USDA chart identifies thirteen different climate zones, with one being the coolest and thirteen the warmest. Level one represents an extremely cold climate, such as Alaska's cold, mountainous regions. Very warm or hot locations, such as Hawaii or Puerto Rico, are represented in red. Each gradient indicates a 10 degree change in temperature. An "a" or "b" after a number indicates a 5 degree change in temperature. For example, in Sonoma county, 9a region is, on average, five degrees cooler than 9b.

Sunset Climate Zone information encompasses more details. Factors such as fog, elevation and proximity to large bodies of water, such as the Sonoma coast, are considered. Sonoma's Sunset Climate ranges from 14 - inland areas with some ocean influence - to 17 which encompasses areas close to the Pacific coast that may experience marine effects. This approach helps you determine, broadly speaking, the types of plants that will thrive in your particular area. Sonoma county is vast and covers areas from the coast, to valley regions and mountain tops. Find your location on the map and use the number shown on the map to determine the general growing information for your region.

Most gardening books, catalogs, seed packets and nurseries refer to plant hardiness zones, climate zones or growing zones. When you go to a nursery, don't throw away the plant tag. It has a lot of useful information about plant care including the USDA or Sunset zone information. If you are growing annual flowers and vegetables, USDA hardiness zones are only relevant to determine first and last average frost dates which will roughly indicate the length of your growing season. Determining city or town boundaries for the Sunset Climate Zones is a bit more complex due to the numerous microclimates within each zone. More important is to consider the description in each Sunset zone and consider the microclimate where you live.

Of course, no zoning or mapping system is perfect. The microclimate in your garden will impact how your plants grow. However, the USDA hardiness map and Sunset Climates Zone information provide useful guidelines to help you decide when to plant and which varieties have enough time to mature in your garden.

Additional Reading:

Sonoma Microclimates: bit.ly/3lfg9qy

Last average frost date for Sonoma County: bit.ly/3P043f4

NOAA Interactive frost date map: bit.ly/3P5HfdR

USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map: bit.ly/3Tk7eRy

Sunset Climate Zone for Northern California: bit.ly/3OXH9F6

Contributors to this week's column were Fay Mark, Patricia Rosales and Rob Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County <https://sonomamgucanr.edu> , provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.