

Know What to Grow for Your Zone

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Gardening is the fastest growing leisure activity in North America. Every year both young and old people discover the joys and rewards of this pastime. From the practical side of gardening, such as growing herbs and vegetables for consumption to the exotic like breeding orchids or cultivating special hybrid roses, gardening can be fulfilling both spiritually and physically.

Choosing plants for our landscape and gardens can be sometimes just as challenging as growing them. Plants have specific requirements – both climatic and care considerations. As a gardener you should be aware which plants are indigenous to your area and which introduced plants are hardy under varying conditions. For instance, one of my favourite herbs is Rosmarinus or Rosemary. It is native to the warm coastal areas of the Mediterranean and therefore considered semi-tropical. I live near London, ON, in Zone 6 and the only way I can grow Rosemary is in a pot. I put it outside during the summer but I have to bring it in at the first signs of a frost in the fall. However, in southern Arizona (Zone 9 & 10+) Rosemary grows profusely in gardens and landscapes.

A hardiness zone is where types of trees, shrubs and flowers will most likely survive and is a specific geographical area with its own set of environmental conditions. These zones are based on the average climatic conditions of that area. A hardiness zone map is a graphic representation of a number of such zones. These maps are usually found in the front pages of gardening books, seed catalogs or can be obtained from your federal department of agriculture. Both Canada and the United States have their own hardiness zone maps, which use unfortunately different numbers.

The American hardiness zones are based strictly on temperature, that is the minimum winter temperature of that area. The coldest zone, the interior of Alaska, is 1, which represents minimum temperatures of below –50F. The Hawaiian Islands, which is Zone 11, has a minimum winter temperature above 40F.

For Canada, on the other hand, scientists created a plant hardiness map using Canadian plant survival data and a wider range of climatic variables such as minimum winter temperatures, length of the frost-free period, summer rainfall, maximum temperatures, snow cover and even January rainfall and maximum wind speed. The harshest zone (0) is the Arctic and northern part of Canada and the mildest is parts of Vancouver Island having Zones 8 & 9.

As a general guide to Canadians, add one number to the American zones to get the Canadian equivalent and the opposite process, subtract one number from the Canadian zones, to get the American equivalent. Don't forget this is just a general guide for hardiness rating for plants and you could come across some discrepancies.

Knowing and understanding hardiness zones is important. This information will come in handy when you are purchasing new perennials or shrubbery for your garden in your area or in a different part of the country and will take some of the guesswork out of your plant choices. Gardening is an endless trial and error process and it may be fun or challenging to try something different for your zone and it just might work in your garden.