

## Choosing the Right Plants for Your Hardiness Zone

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Have you ever gone into a garden center with the idea that if they are selling the plant there then it must be good for the area? Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Some plant tags contain a lot of information about the plant if you can interpret it while others may have a sticker saying the common name of the plant and that's it. Some of the most important information on a tag is the hardiness zones. This will help you determine if you are choosing the right plant for the right place.

There are several hardiness zone maps, although the one that we hear about most often and see on plant tags is the USDA Hardiness Zones. This map separates the country into 12 zones, based on the average minimum temperature over a 30-year period, <http://tinyurl.com/8th8tl9>.

This map is periodically updated. In 2012, some of Alachua County shifted from Zone 8b to 9a, which means that on average, our minimum winter temperature will not dip below 20 degrees Fahrenheit. Folks in Alachua, Newberry and High Springs still need to follow the 8b hardiness zone and Marion County stayed in Zone 9a.

This will help you choose plants for your location based on how well they will survive the cold. Precautions to protect plants should still be taken if the temperature drops below this range.

If you decide to choose a plant in a higher zone like 10-12, which include tropical plants, you run the risk of losing them in the winter. This will mean more nights of covering up the plants or bringing them in when it gets too cold.

Microclimates are the exception when growing some of the warmer-natured plants. These are pockets in your garden that may be warmer or cooler. Brick walls and paving will hold heat and release it slowly. Plants around a pond can be warmed up from the warmer air around the water. The area may also be protected from wind by evergreens. Tracking the temperature in these areas can help you determine this.

If you choose plants in the lower zones, they may not get enough chilling period to do well. That is why several fruit plants can't grow in Florida. Most varieties of raspberries have hardiness zones of 4-8, although researchers are trying to breed raspberries that require fewer chill hours.

The USDA Hardiness Zone map covers the cooler temperatures, but what about this Florida heat? Just as the winters are getting warmer, so are the summers, and some plants that can take the cold can't handle the heat.

The American Horticultural Society published a heat zone map for this purpose. It is also divided into 12 zones based on the average number of days that the temperature reached or exceeded 86 degrees. We are in Zone 10 for this map, meaning that we have 150 to 180 heat-days.

More plant tags are listing this additional zone. They would be found in pairs of number ranges with the first set in increasing order referring to the USDA Hardiness Zone and the second set in decreasing order providing the heat zone rating. I found an easy plant search function on <http://www.learn2grow.com/Plants/> that lists all the different zones.

This explains the decline of some of our favorite plants. The flowering dogwood (*Cornus alba*) is a 5-9, 9-3, so it can handle the cold, but not the heat. The heat would stress it out making it

more susceptible to problems such as diseases; anthracnose is a major disease problem in dogwood in Alachua County.

I loved growing butterfly bush (*Buddleja davidii*) in Virginia. They were gorgeous! Many people grow them around here, but they look scraggly and I wondered why. With a rating of 5-9, 9-2, it is another victim of too much heat.