

# Understanding Plant Labels

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## Plant Names

The label that comes with most plants found in plant nurseries contains lots of information useful to gardeners. Even experienced gardeners can benefit from reading tags because of the frequent introduction of new cultivars with growing requirements different from others in the same species. A good plant label will give the common name of the plant as well as its botanical name. Common names vary. Different people with different backgrounds use different common names and one common name may be used to refer to two (or more) entirely different plants. Botanical names are exact and let the gardener know exactly what is being purchased.

## Growing Zones

The plant label typically will indicate the 'zone' in which the plant grows. Plants are rated by their United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Hardiness zone. These zones are based on historical weather records and indicate the average lowest temperatures that reasonably may be expected in a particular geographic area. The first USDA map was released in 1960 and the most recent in 2012. (Figure 1.) Other organizations, including the American Horticultural Society and the Arbor Day Foundation, also have released their versions of hardiness zone maps.

These maps divide the country into 10° Fahrenheit (F) zones. For example, Tallahassee is in USDA Zone 8, indicating that the minimum

temperatures expected in winter fall between 10° and 19° F. The zones often are subdivided into two half-zones, and Tallahassee is further placed in Zone 8b (15° – 19° F). An important point to remember is that these zones are based on averages. Lower temperatures have occurred. The lowest temperature on record for Florida happened in Tallahassee on February 13, 1899 when the mercury dipped to -2° F, well below the minimum temperature expected for Zone 8b.

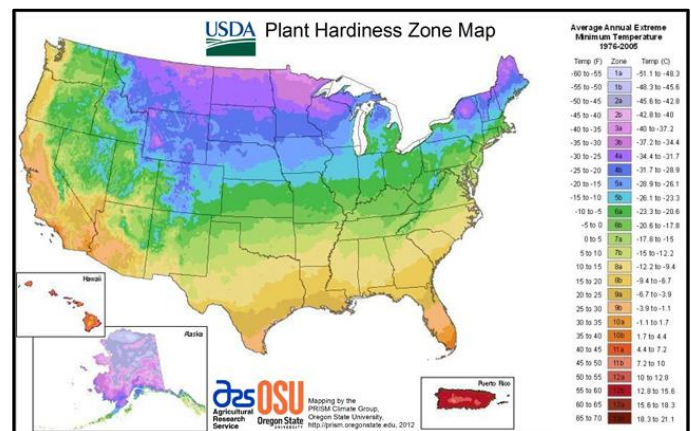


Figure 1. USDA 2012 Plant Hardiness zone map.  
<https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov>

## Light Requirements

The label indicates the lighting requirements of the plant. Different plants – sometimes different cultivars – do best at different levels of sunlight exposure. A plant label will give you general lighting recommendations for that plant. The label often divides light conditions into Full Sun,

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Partial Sun, and Shade. Full Sun typically indicates at least six hours of uninterrupted, direct sunlight per day. Partial Sun often refers to fewer hours of direct sun (typically three hours or less), and Shade indicates little or no direct sunlight.

## Water Requirements

The label frequently gives the water requirements of the plant. Some plants prefer to dry out between water applications, and some plants grow best in soil that stays uniformly moist. Plants in between these extremes grow best when the soil loses surface moisture but remains moist at a depth of one to two inches. Every gardener has an excellent moisture meter with them at all times! Stick a finger down into the soil to the depth of the second knuckle. If the soil feels moist to the fingertip, there is sufficient water for growing plants. Knowing a plant's water requirements allows gardeners to group plants together for maximum success.

## Plant Size

Some plant tags give average dimensions of the maintained plant at maturity. Many plants, if allowed grow without pruning, will grow even larger than these average dimensions. The dimensions given typically include height and width and sometimes proper spacing. Plants placed too close can have stunted, malformed growth. They typically are more susceptible to insect and disease infestations. Don't crowd plants because you want an 'instant' landscape. An important point to remember is "look up." Overhead obstruction, i.e. building eaves, utility lines, mature trees, etc., will impact the success of newly installed plants. Look down, as well, adequate space for root development is essential. A plant may 'fit' into a planting space

when small, but not when mature. Plants will do best when planted according to label directions.

## 'Right Plant, Right Place'

Other information sometimes included on plant labels describe plant care and use. Is it useful for attracting wildlife? Are the plants resistant to wildlife predation? Does it have attractive flowers useful for cutting or attracting butterflies? Does the plant adapt well to container planting? All of these things help you choose the proper plant for your garden. It all comes back to the old adage, "Right Plant; Right Place."



Figure 2. Plant labels provide a wealth of information to help the gardener ensure the success of the plant.