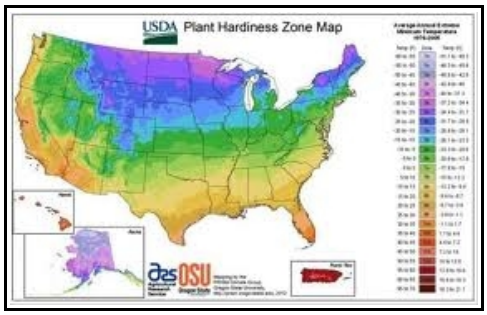
Garden Tips

Changes to the Climate Hardiness Zone Map

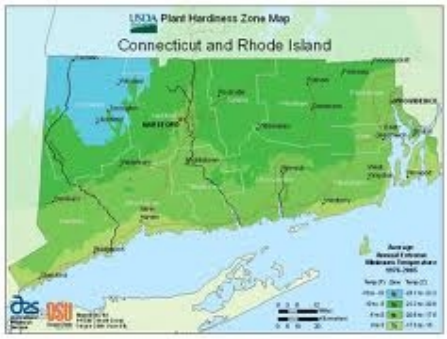


March 2012
by Sally Pfeifer

Here is some very important news: The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced on January 25, 2012, that the climate hardiness zone map has changed.

We are now warmer.

The USDA hardiness zone map is the map most gardeners use and the one most national garden magazines, catalogs, books and many nurseries refer to in instructions for planting, pruning and general care. This map divides North America into 11 separate zones. Each zone is 10 degrees Fahrenheit warmer or colder than the adjacent zone. This year two more zones were added. In some versions, the map has been further divided into “a” and “b” regions.



If Redding gardeners go online (planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb) and put in their zip code, it will come up as zone 6b. Connecticut has moved up 5 degrees Fahrenheit, so that is half a zone.

For this new map, the USDA website uses 30 years of weather data gathered from 1976 to 2005 and is more precise than the 1990 version. Dr. Catherine Woteki, USDA Chief Scientist and Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics, says that across the country people will be seeing some changes. She also said that these might not be permanent climate changes.

Gardening consultant Charlie Nardozzi lives in Northern Vermont, which jumped to a milder zone. “If you want to say what is politically correct, you can say 'something is changing,'” Nardozzi says. “But the climate is changing. Spring is coming sooner and lasting longer. Fall lasts longer, and overall the weather is so much more erratic.”

Among areas of change, a higher number means warmer. Much of the Northeast is half a zone warmer. For example. Pennsylvania, which was about equally divided between zone 5 and zone 6

in the 1990 map, is now about 70% zone 6 and 30% zone 5. Ohio was mostly zone 5 and now is mostly zone 6. Nebraska was mostly zone 4 and is now almost entirely zone 5. Both South Florida and Southern California have new hotter areas around cities, but California also has some colder areas in the mountains.

The zones offer important guidelines for all planters, including tree growers. For example, sugar maples won't produce maple sugar in a warm climate. Sugar maples need the beginning of warmer days but still need cold nights. They need warmer days to bring the maple fluids up into the branches and cold nights to bring the sugar fluids down from the branches back into the roots; that's when the tree is tapped to take the fluid to make the syrup. Sugar maples thrive in the colder zone 3, dogwoods in zone 5 and rhododendrons in zone 7.

This spring will offer a time to experiment with some plantings. I can think of roses and some specimen shrubs and dwarf trees that would not have survived here in past years.

Now the zones have shifted northward. The new map shows that in much of the country, winters are not as cold as they used to be, and spring planting comes earlier. The nationwide shift in the planting season provoked lots of questions about just how much to attribute to climate change. USDA officials, while introducing their new map to reporters, insisted that they were making no claims about global warming. This may not be a permanent condition, and we as gardeners always look to the advantages of change.

<u>Sources</u>

Gardening map of warming
New USDA climate zone map
USDA plant zone map
National gardening Association