



Plant tags provide valuable information when selecting plants.

Is This Plant Right for My Garden? Interpreting Plant Tags

By Cathy Slavin

There are many skills that gardeners need to acquire to achieve the garden of their dreams (has anyone out there done that yet?). As we get ready to head out to garden centers, let's consider an essential skill: Identifying plants that will thrive in our garden. Plant tags (and Google) can help.

Take, for example, the sun exposure the plant requires, usually stated on the tag as one (or more) of Full Sun (6+ hours), Part Sun/Shade (4-6 hours) or Shade (less than 4 hours). By observing your yard during the growing season, you can determine the exposure of a site. All plants need light but there are many plants that thrive even in full shade.

The plant tag also lists the USDA Hardiness Zone range. The USDA determines hardiness zones based on average annual minimum temperatures. On the USDA map, Falmouth is designated as Zone 7a (0 to 5° F). It's interesting to note that the same zone is assigned to much of Maryland and parts of Virginia and North Carolina--areas much farther south than us. Though our temperatures (both high and low) are indeed tempered by the water that surrounds Cape Cod, we reach and sustain lower temperatures more often and over longer periods of time. That is substantially different for a plant than an occasional dip in temperature. Further, our Springs are cold and wet, a combination that encourages root rot (though our sandy soil does help with drainage).

For these reasons, I choose plants that are hardy to at least Zone 6 (-10 to 0), a practice that has worked well for me (after losing a few Zone 7 plants). If I'm planning on overwintering a plant in a pot, I look for plants that are at least Zone 5 hardy.

The mature height and width of a plant is also on the tag which is helpful in deciding where you might plant it (front or back of the border) and the distance at which it should be placed relative to other plants. One caution, however, size can differ based on conditions and some plants, notably evergreens, don't really stop growing but do grow more slowly once mature.

Wind is also a factor on Cape Cod. It tends to dry plants out more quickly and increases the need for water. Our sandy soil works against us here. Looking for "Drought Resistant" on the plant tag can help. Adding organic matter to the soil also boosts its water retention and nutrient holding capacity.

Some plant tags also list deer and rabbit resistance but it's important to note that no plant is truly immune to such browsing. I have not yet observed deer in my garden but I'm pretty sure my garden is listed on some secret rabbit publication as a "free salad bar." When plants are tender, such as newly planted seedlings or perennials just emerging from the ground, many "rabbit resistant" labeled plants do get sampled. Baby bunnies are the most destructive because they have not yet read the list of resistant plants and will try anything! In Spring, my garden looks like a chicken wire scrap yard as I cover all my young plants to allow them to get strong enough to reach their highest level of resistance. I frequently ask Google: "Is [*plant name*] rabbit resistant?"

It's a proven axiom: "*Right plant; right place.*" Get to know your conditions and read plant tags and online plant descriptions to determine the right plant for your garden.