

Growing in the Zone

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In sports, being “in the zone” means being in a mental state of calmness and confidence, where all the right moves seem to just come effortlessly and naturally.

Some gardeners also seem to be growing “in the zone”. They’re the ones that seem to have green thumbs. What are their secrets to making it look so easy? Is it the right fertilizer, as those television commercials would have us believe? Is it some special home concoction, as K-Mart’s Jerry Baker would have us believe? No, as your grandmother probably knew, it’s not some gimmick. It’s mostly just attention to the basics, proper timing, consistent attention, and good common sense.

The Basics

Right Climate

Cold

The first step to being in the zone is to make sure you’re growing plants that are right for our USDA Plant Hardiness Zone. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has divided the country into plant hardiness zones based on the average minimum winter temperatures. We are in zone 8b, where the average minimum winter temperatures are 15-20 degrees Fahrenheit. Tifton, Georgia, at 10-15 degrees average minimum winter temperature, is in Zone 8a. In plant catalogs you usually find plant suitability expressed in terms of whole zones, for example, Zone 8. But zone 8 covers a north-south spread from approximately Macon, Georgia to Gainesville, Florida. And we all know that there are some plants that will make it through most winters in Gainesville that won’t make it through most winters in Macon. We know, too, that there are plants that will grow for ten or fifteen years just fine in Gainesville and then suddenly be frozen by a colder-than-normal winter. Remember, the zones are based on average temperatures. So, we need to use common sense when we shop in plant catalogs and look at the zone ratings.

Heat

Plants are also limited by the amount of heat they can tolerate. In 1997, the American Horticultural Society released the AHS Heat-Zone map. The twelve zones of the map indicate the average number of days each year that a given region experiences “heat days”, days having temperatures over 86 degrees. According to the AHS information, that is the point at which plants begin suffering physiological damage from heat. The zones range from Zone 1 (less than one heat day) to Zone 12 (more than 210 heat days). As

Tallahassee gardening enthusiast David Skinner explains on his website, <http://www.nettally.com/skinnerd/zone2.htm>, we are in heat zone 9, bordering on heat zone 10, receiving 120-150 days having temperatures over 86 degrees. According to the AHS website where the map is explained, http://www.ahs.org/publications/heat_zone_map.htm, eventually we will see heat zone designations joining hardiness zone designations in books and plant catalogs. Though, as Skinner says, several years after development of the heat zones we have yet to see the information being used in catalogs and by nurseries. Skinner also says that there are some problems with some of the information being used in the books: "... the heat zone ratings have been around such a short time that there has not been much data compiled on the heat tolerance of plants, as applied to the AHS scale."

Skinner considers a zoning classification system developed by Southern Living magazine as an excellent alternative to the other systems for the southeastern U.S. The Southern Living zones are based on the USDA cold hardiness zones, but other factors besides temperature are considered in their ratings of plants. They have divided the South into five climatic zones. We are in their "Coastal South". Skinner says that the advantage of the Southern Living zones is not so much in the definition of the zones as in the way they are applied to the plant ratings. Southern Living has considered all the climatic factors of these zones when they rate a plant's ability to thrive in that zone. For example, they give full consideration to the different rain patterns along the Gulf coast, compared to inland areas of the middle south.

In Skinner's opinion, the best general purpose reference for southern gardeners is the Southern Living Garden Book. It lists over 5,000 plants (including specific cultivars) and gives clear advice on cultural requirements and the Southern Living zone for each plant. Skinner says he has compared their listings against his own experiences and found them to be quite consistent.

Right Light

All plants need light to grow and develop. Light intensity and duration have a marked effect on plant and leaf size, color, shape, foliage density, and amount of flowering. Some plants have certain requirements of light intensity. Other plants are tolerant of a wide range of light conditions. Most plant lists or reference books give light requirements for plants. For example, the University of Florida IFAS Extension website <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG035> on Perennials for Florida gives light requirements.

Most plants can be categorized as requiring one of three levels of light — full sun, partial shade, or full shade. These levels are based on the number of hours of sunlight the plant needs for proper growth and development. Full sun is a long duration of intense sun exposure, for example from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. or noon to 5:00 p.m. Plants in partial shade would receive shorter periods of intense sunlight, such as those receiving sun 7:00 a.

m. to 11:00 a.m. Plants in full shade would receive no direct sunlight.

Not only does shade duration have to be considered, but shade intensity must also be considered. A light shade would be provided by pines or other tall, high-canopied trees. Most plants will thrive under these conditions, but if the shade is dense, such as under live oaks, special care in planting definitely should be exercised. In dense shade, failure is ensured unless you select plants that have evolved in nature to tolerate such shade.

Water and Oxygen

Though most of us realize that plant roots require water, many people do not realize that plant roots also require oxygen. Both are equally important, though plants vary in their requirements for each of these factors. Drought tolerance is addressed more frequently than ever before in plant lists and references, especially in areas such as Florida where water is at a premium. One such list for our area can be found at the University of Florida IFAS Extension website, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP022> .

Many of us have areas in our landscape that don't drain well. Such areas are common in the north part of Leon County, though they can be found in all areas of the county. If you have a poorly drained area, you need to select plants that don't require as much oxygen for the root system. UF-IFAS Extension has a list of plants tolerant of wet areas at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG253> . When you plant in wet areas, it is also extremely important not to plant too deeply. The deeper you go in a wet soil, the shorter the supply of oxygen.

Soils that are compacted are also oxygen-poor. Whenever possible, the best remedy for compacted soils is cultivation. When you plant, dig a planting hole three times the width of the container.

As you care for plants, remember the need plants have for both water and oxygen. You want to make sure there is water in the root zone of the plants. That's usually the top six inches of soil. But you don't want to water so frequently that oxygen is in short supply. When you plant a new plant, be aware that the root zone of that plant is limited to the rootball that was in the container. Also, be aware that most of the soil mixes used in nursery containers are designed to drain quickly, ensuring that the roots have plenty of oxygen, too. So you will find that the rootball of a new plant dries quickly, possibly requiring daily watering during hot spells until the roots have grown out into the surrounding soil. There is no substitute for the finger test, feeling the soil in the root zone of the plant to see how moist it feels.

Nutrients

All plants require nutrients in order to carry out photosynthesis and their other metabolic

processes. But, so often, just as we Americans tend to overeat, many of us tend to over-fertilize our plants, too. Think moderation. You can always add more if you find it's needed. If you would like to test your soil to determine soil pH and levels of phosphorous and potassium, you may obtain the UF-IFAS Extension Soil Testing Lab materials from the UF-IFAS Extension in Leon County at 615 Paul Russell Road. Or you may find the form and instructions at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/files/SS/SS18700.pdf>.

Pests

Pests can pose problems for some plants you grow. In fact, some plants just tend to get certain pests. Many "green thumb" gardeners tend to avoid these plants that are magnets for pests. Others know when to watch for the pests so they can take needed control measures. The key to dealing with pest problems in the garden and landscape is to be consistently observant, and don't overreact. Before attempting to "control" a pest, make sure you have, indeed, found and identified the pest. Trying to kill the wrong thing leads many gardeners to worse problems as beneficial organisms can be killed with unnecessary pesticide applications and sometimes plants can be stressed.

Proper Timing

In gardening, timing is everything. You have to learn when to do what. How do you learn? By following localized gardening advice such as that from your University Extension Service. Use our local UF-IFAS Extension website at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu> as a starting place for information. Spend some time on it, and you'll find that it leads to a wealth of localized information on the web. Within the next year, my fellow northwest Florida extension horticulture agents and I hope to provide you with an even more organized web network of localized information and links. So keep coming back to this website throughout the seasons.

Be very wary of gardening information that isn't localized. The experienced gardener who already knows the local scene may be able to glean information from syndicated garden columns and national garden books. They also may be able to pick up some good plant bargains from national chain stores. But if you're a novice gardener, be careful relying on these sources for information unless you can find an experienced local gardener to interpret it for you. Gardening in north Florida is not like gardening in Atlanta or south Florida. If you want to be "in the zone", you must remember this. Otherwise, you can waste a lot of time and money and become very frustrated with gardening.

Common Sense

Remember that plants are living systems growing in a complicated environment. Nothing is static. Nothing lives forever. Expect some failures. Learn from them the best you can

and move on. Don't keep trying something over and over if it doesn't work. Stay 'in the zone'.

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