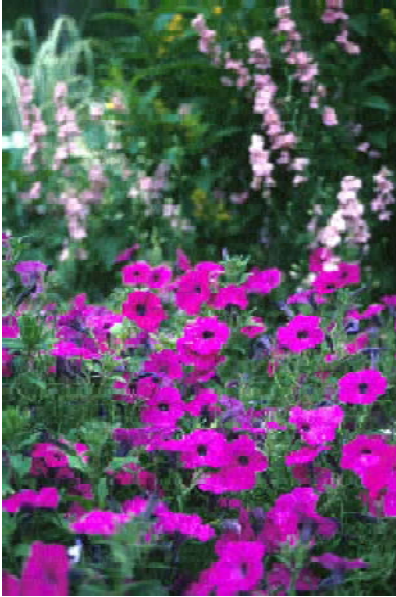


## North Florida Gardening Seasons Are Unique

Larry Williams

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I call them frustrated gardeners. These are people that were good gardeners elsewhere and then they move to north Florida.



These people are following gardening practices that worked for them in some other part of the country. They may even have attempted to grow some northern plant that just will not perform up to par down here in the south. Many times these people become frustrated when dealing with our climate, salt, sand, pests, etc.

Success in gardening often depends upon knowing local climatic conditions, and northern Gulf Coast weather is like nowhere else in the country. We are in a unique zone - somewhere between temperate and subtropical. This location allows us to grow a wider range of plant species than just about anywhere else in the country,

According to the latest USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, we are in Zone 8. The southern portion of the northwest Florida coastal counties is in Zone 8b, with the lowest winter temperatures in the 15 to 20 degree F. range. The more northern parts of these same northwestern counties are in Zone 8a, showing past winter temperatures as low as 10 to 15 degrees. Leon County is in zone 8b.

We normally receive several brief freezes each winter. Landscapes close to the Gulf and bays are of course, warmer and experience fewer freezes. Temperatures are often 5 to 10 degrees F. higher than are those found just a few miles inland.

Cold periods are brief, usually lasting no more than two or three days. Of most concern are our rapidly fluctuating winter temperatures. Winter temperatures can drop quickly following a warm period and temperate zone plants are often caught in a semi-dormant state. Some cold injury is not unusual, even on normally cold hardy species.

Some irrigation of most landscapes is needed during the winter. Extended dry periods during the colder months are not unusual.

With our unusual Gulf Coast weather in mind, following are a few winter gardening tips:

- Allow temperate zone woody shrubs to slow down and enter dormancy by withholding high nitrogen-containing fertilizers now.
- Irrigate landscape plantings thoroughly one to two days before a freeze is expected. Well-watered ornamentals tolerate freezes much better than drought stressed plants.
- Continue planting cool season vegetables such as cabbage, broccoli, brussels sprouts, radish, carrots, cauliflower, kohlrabi, mustard, onions and turnips.

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- This is one of the most ideal times to plant trees and shrubs. Our relatively mild winters allow for root growth and a jump on establishment before hot weather arrives next year.
- Prepare beds for the planting of wildflowers and flower seeds such as bachelor buttons, sweet peas, larkspur, and poppies in early November.
- Rake pine needles and use them as mulch in flower, shrub and vegetable beds.
- Establish cool season annuals for winter and early spring color. Bedding plants of snapdragons, dianthus, pansies and petunias have begun arriving at local nurseries and garden centers.
- Finish dividing and transplanting the clumping perennials such as daylilies, mondo, ajuga and lirioppe.
- Locate local sources or place orders for fruit trees. Dormant trees are normally shipped during December and January for winter planting.

For more information on gardening in north Florida, visit the UF-IFAS website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

*\*Larry Williams is a horticulture extension agent for the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Okaloosa County. Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Extension, Leon County: petunias.jpg. Now is an excellent time to plant petunias.*

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