



Know your planting zones

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Let's say your thumb isn't exactly green. Let's say it is, in fact, more gray or black than anything. That's OK. You, too, can still have a gorgeous garden by following the USDA's planting zones.

What are planting zones?

The USDA Plant Hardiness Zone map helps gardeners determine which plants are more likely to thrive in a given area. It's based on the average annual minimum temperatures, divided into 10-degree zones. You can type your ZIP code into

the USDA website and find exactly what zone you are.

The latest USDA map was created in 2012 and represents a change from the previous 1990 version.

The newer version of the map is generally one five-degree half-zone warmer than previous versions throughout the United States. Partially, the USDA says, this change comes from more thorough and sophisticated climate data that improved the accuracy and detail of the map.

Factors in the zones

Though the map is categorized by minimum temperature zones, the USDA

also took into consideration other factors. These include light, soil moisture, duration of cold weather and humidity. Also bear in mind that the map covers the entire country and while accuracy is better, it still isn't precise for any given area. The map is based on averages, not the lowest or highest temperatures ever, and your more delicate plants may still need to be protected in extreme weather.

Likewise, if a new version of the map comes out and you switch zones, that doesn't mean you need to rip out all your existing plants. What's doing well in your

yard will likely to continue to do well, as specific plants may develop hardiness to different conditions over time.

Get experience

The best thing you can do to keep your plants alive, in addition to consulting the map, is to get more gardening experience.

Start by asking the experts at your local nursery what plants would do best in your area. Take note of the light exposure in your garden, any specific pests you have to battle, and be honest about your gardening experience and the amount of effort you're willing to put in.



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Pressure washers take low-pressure water from your garden hose and push it out through a nozzle at high pressure.

Power washing basics

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Nozzles

Summer weather means spending more time outside. And while you're out there, you may notice that the winter months took a harsh toll on your exterior surfaces.

Fortunately, power washing can get most of your surfaces sparking again. Keep reading for more tips on how to choose a power washer and use it safely.

A pressure washer will usually come with a variety of nozzles to do a variety of jobs. These may include:

0-degree nozzles: the most powerful, concentrated nozzle setting.

15-degree nozzles: used for heavy-duty cleaning.

25-degree nozzles: used for general cleaning.

40-degree nozzles: used for vehicles, patio furniture, boats and easily damaged surfaces.

65-degree nozzles: a low-pressure nozzle used to apply soap and other cleaning agents.

Always read the instruction manual that comes with your pressure washer and make sure you know how to how to quickly turn it off and release the pressure. For safety's sake, stand on a stable surface while you're pressure washing.

Wear eye and ear protection and never leave a spray gun unattended. Never point the spray gun at people, animals or plants and keep the spray away from electricity.

Types of pressure washers

Pressure washers take low-pressure water from your garden hose and push it out through a nozzle at high pressure. Pressure washers can be powered by electricity or gas. Electric pressure washers usually cost less and run quieter than gas-powered models, but the trade off is that they're less portable (you'll need to have power wherever you use it) and usually less powerful than gas-powered washers.

Gas pressure washers are good for larger jobs such as decks, patios, sidewalks and siding. You can get gas washers with an electric start to make it easier to start up. With gas washers, you'll need to be sure to follow manufacturer's instructions for mixing the oil and gas for the machine. You may even have to vary fuel types depending on your climate.

Maintenance

Follow the manufacturer's instructions for proper maintenance of your machine. In general, you may need to regularly maintain the washer's pump and, for gas motors, you'll also need to tend to the air filter, oil and spark plug.

Perk up for pollinators

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Bees and other pollinators — bats, butterflies, beetles, wasps and birds, among others — play a critical role in nature and in our food production system.

According to the USDA, more than 100 different crops worth \$18 billion rely on pollinators. But some pollinator populations are in rapid decline.

Colony collapse disorder

The Western honey bee, in particular, is vulnerable to colony's collapse disorder, a condition that causes worker bees to disappear, leaving behind only the queen and some nursemaid bees to care for babies. The USDA says the disorder is likely the cause of stressors in the environment, such as pests, disease, pollutants, nutritional deficits and cloak of habitat.

Because the problem was recognized, honey bee populations are recovering. There's still work to do, however, in bringing bee and other pollinator populations back.

Ways you can help

One thing everyone can do is to choose landscaping and gardening projects that include native species that flower at different times of year to provide a steady food source for pollinator populations. Bees and other pollinators prefer clumps of flowers in different colors and shapes. If you live in an area that hosts a monarch migration, plant milkweed in your yard to provide food for caterpillars.

In addition to good groceries, you can also provide nesting sites. Butterflies like the monarch prefer specific plants for hosting their larvae, like the milkweed, while hummingbirds like trees and shrubs. Bees like to build nests in the ground on in wood or dry plant stems. Provide nesting sites for bees by leaving

ground nesting sites that are well-drained and face south so they get the most sun. Dead or hollow stumps and plant stems also make great bee habitat, or you can buy artificial nesting sites that are attractive additions to your garden.

Bee better program

Bee Better Certification

is a program funded through the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. It certifies the use of pollinator-friendly conservation practices on farms. Manufacturers that qualify can use the Bee Better certification logo on product packaging, giving consumers an option to support farms that support bees.



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