

Home/Garden

Hardiness maps can help save plants

There are three kinds of gardeners in the world: those who slavishly adhere to hardiness zone maps; those who studiously ignore hardiness zone maps; and those who don't know what a hardiness zone map is! All three groups can be missing out on certain successes in the garden.

Garden books, magazines and catalogs often include a hardiness zone map which indicates the average minimum temperatures suffered during the winter over a given area. This map which has been in use since 1938 was slightly revised in 1967 and is based on records summarized by the U.S. Weather Bureau.

The national map provides the gardener with some general information, but anyone who travels as little as five or ten miles to work or on errands will notice there is a real variation in the weather and in plants' growing cycles within a relatively small geographical area.

According to the hardiness zone map, the average minimum temperatures in my half of Massachusetts are usually 10 to 20 degrees

Pat Leuchtman



Between The Rows

below zero. However my house is 1600 feet above a valley and the temperatures are more severe because of the altitude.

According to my records, I also have fewer days between the last spring frost and the first fall frost. Considering the altitude and the 25 mile distance into the valley, you might expect a fair amount of difference. Yet my growing season is probably a month longer than my nearest neighbors' growing season — and they are only 1/3 of a mile away, downhill from my house.

My gardens all lie on a southern slope that enjoys lots of breeze — in the winter we call it the Montreal Express. I am fortunate to

have this charmed microclimate where early and late frosts are pushed right down the hill to settle on my neighbor's garden. Obviously this suggests at least one other way of measuring hardiness — the number of frost free days.

A reader called me in late October to say that she had an easter lily that was still in bloom in her yard. Wasn't that extraordinary? It was indeed, and it was a pleasure she might not have had, if she followed the conventional wisdom about what would grow, and for how long, in her climate.

The lesson to be learned here is that we all should be willing to check hardiness maps, to listen to the advice and experience of other gardeners, but then to be willing to experiment, to push or test the limitations of our garden

site, possibly to fail, but possibly to meet with a beautiful success.

With the holidays nearly upon us I've had

several questions about Christmas cactus. The first is, what's the difference between Christmas and Thanksgiving cactus?

Both belong to the Schlumbergera family, but *S. bridgesii* (Christmas cactus) has stem segments with smooth edges and *S. truncata* (Thanksgiving cactus) has pointed or hooked edges. They bloom at slightly different times, but the white, pink or red blossoms are similar and they have similar cultural requirements. They both need cool night temperatures (50-55 degrees) in the fall to set buds. If temperatures are warmer, they will need to have at least 12 hours of uninterrupted darkness to set buds.

Do not fertilize in the fall and water just enough to keep the succulent stems from shrivelling. If you watch carefully, you'll soon know how often to water based on the size of your plant, the pot and the relative dryness of your room. I water my Thanksgiving cactus about every 10 days all year long.

These cactus plants need bright, indirect sun. An uncurtained north window is fine, or any other exposure, as long as strong sun does not shine in for very long each day. Do not fertilize the plants until spring and then on through the summer when it is growing most vigorously.

One way to encourage bushy growth, with more stems capable of bearing a bloom, is to cut it back, prune it slightly after blooming. Cut off two or three segments from each stem and it will branch out. Each of those pruned tips can then be rooted in moist vermiculite.

Make a little greenhouse by putting a plastic baggie over your pot or flat, making sure to hold it off your cuttings with little sticks. This baggie/greenhouse will keep the rooting medium from drying out too quickly, but check it periodically and add a little water if necessary. Within three or four weeks the cutting should have rooted and can be moved into small pots.