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By SEAN JAMES, N.P.D.,
PRESIDENT OF FERN RIDGE LANDSCAPING

Hardiness Zones

A moon or two ago - I'm not sure whether it was 'many moons' or not - a group of climatologists and horticulturists gathered all the info they could about where plants could grow on this continent. With data, collected over several years, on average growing days, wind chill, and number of days spent below certain winter temperatures, a list was compiled so that envelope-pushing gardeners would know how hardy certain shrubs were. A map was designed which shows what zone you are in within a range of temperatures. Milton is roughly in Zone 5b but sits right on the cusp of 5a & 5b. Zone 5a has a temperature range of -10 to -15 degrees Celsius. Search on the internet for "Canadian Hardiness Zone Map" to find the map itself. Halton County is exceptional in that areas along the lake are as warm as Zone 6b and exposed areas in north Halton are as cold as Zone 5a. The Golden Horseshoe even boasts a few pockets of Zone 7. To give you a frame of reference, Winnipeg is in Zone 3 and Philadelphia is just barely Zone 7a. Why so warm here? Our proximity to the Great Lakes moderates winter temperatures and the Escarpment shelters us from winter winds.

There are several interesting points you should know about the list. Since it was designed for woody plants such as shrubs and trees, it is less accurate for herbaceous plants, (meaning they die back to the ground every winter), like perennials and bulbs. It is entirely possible that you may live in a microclimate such as a hillside where the cold may drain away down the hill. Conversely, a valley floor would be a bit colder than the surroundings since the cold will settle there first causing an early killing frost. Other factors which may influence a microclimate include a windbreak of trees, an exposed hilltop or a nearby body of water. Oddly enough, some plants will survive in Barrie which won't survive here since they get more regular snow cover which insulates the plants. Other plants may not live here, not

because of the cold but because they don't like damp roots in the winter or the way our climate freezes and thaws throughout the winter.

The list is always evolving as we learn more about plants and experiment with them. Several years ago we believed a wonderful perennial called *Crocsmia* was not hardy. Now we know otherwise. Likewise, *Leadwort* and *Passiflora incarnata*, a perennial *Passionflower* vine, were not hardy but we have since learned that they just don't sprout until June. Some plants such as a bold grass with the cumbersome name of *Variiegated Giant Reedmace* just need to be planted a bit deeper as does a perennial *Alstromeria*, (Thanks to Susan at *Lost Horizons* in Acton for that one!), - six inches for the grass and a foot and a half deep for the *Alstromeria*. Gardeners continue to be surprised by what's hardy and what is not.

My garden in Milton boasts an annual *Four O'clock*, *Mirabilis* which shocked me by coming up in late May right against the foundation of the house under the bay window as a perennial. I'm assuming the house is bleeding a lot of heat right there or else it's a much hardier plant than gardeners believe. Rest assured that I'll be experimenting with a ton of different plants over the next few years in THAT spot.

Unless you're willing to take temperature readings for a few years in a row in several different locations around your property, you're stuck with a 'best guess' method and a lot of experimenting. Use books as a guideline only and trust the experience of others. Share your findings with local garden clubs and garden centres. Plantfolk are always interested in new hardiness information.

If you just want to play it safe and plant reliably hardy specimens, simply make sure it is hardy in Zone 5. The information is almost always on the tag and most books and magazines will also mention it.

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