

## Plant Tags Explanation

Spring is very near. As customers flock garden centers, employees do their best to help everyone. However, this can be difficult with the influx of so many people. To make it easier for customers, information tags describing growing requirements hang from most plants. However, it is still sometimes difficult to determine what all of the information means. Below are answers to common questions about plant tags.

**What is the USDA cold hardiness zone?** The USDA developed a widely accepted system to determine average minimum temperatures in a particular area. Zones include numbers 1 through 11. Zone 1 is the coldest, with an average minimum temperature of minus 50 degrees, while zone 11 is the warmest, with an average minimum above 40 degrees. Cache Valley is within zones 4 or 5, depending on the specific area. The average minimum in zone 5 varies from 10 to 20 degrees below zero, and zone 4 varies from 20 to 30 degrees below zero. Much of the Wasatch Front is located in zones 5 through 7. This system has flaws where uncommon temperature extremes, late or early frosts, soil type and humidity are not accounted for.

**Why is the Latin or scientific name of the plant listed on the tag?** The Latin name is absolute, while many plants have more than one common name. To make matters more confusing, two unrelated plants may share the same common name. A locally common groundcover with the Latin name of *Vinca major* is an example. I have heard it commonly called vinca, periwinkle and myrtle. Myrtle is also a common name of many other unrelated species. If a customer knows the Latin name of a desired plant, it eliminates many potential errors.

**Is the plant description absolute?** The Intermountain West has a unique climate, and plant tags are usually printed for a national audience. In Utah, our alkaline soil and aridity make growing many nationally "easy to grow" plants such as dogwood trees and rhododendrons extremely difficult. Trust a qualified nursery employee over the tag.

**Is the eventual size of the plant listed on the tag absolute?** No, it is not. Plant tags do not generally account for local growing conditions. Trees and shrubs often grow at a slower pace here than in more favorable climates. Additionally, when a tree or shrub is planted, soil type, fertilizer, pruning and irrigation methods greatly impact growth rate and eventual size. Always research how big a plant may become, and locate it in a space with enough room for growth.

**What information not listed on the tag do I still need to know?** Basic research before purchasing is advisable. Know your needs, what plants you may potentially use, eventual sizes and where particular plants are adapted to grow. USU Extension offers many resources. Tree Browser is an interactive program where desired tree characteristics can be entered, and a list with pictures and descriptions is generated for the user. Access it at <http://treebrowser.org>. Another is a comprehensive list of shrubs with descriptions. It can be accessed at <http://tiny.cc/mvk08>.