

# Understanding Plant Tags

Whenever you purchase a plant it should come with a plastic tag inserted into the pot. When a plant doesn't come with one, I've been known to "borrow" one from another pot. The tag contains lots of useful information and I always keep mine. But tags differ depending on who the commercial grower was or the big box store retailing it. Below is the typical information found on the tag and how to interpret what they're saying.

**Common name** of the plant. If it's a specific variety this will be included. Some plants are branded and you'll see the variety in single quotes like 'Dazzleberry' and the registered name like Sedum **SUNSPARKLER® Series** with a registered R symbol. Registered plants are usually hybrids that don't come true to seed. It is illegal to grow then sell these plants commercially.

**Scientific name** should always be present because this is the only way of knowing exactly what you're buying. It's composed of the Genus and Species e.g. *Forestiera Neomexicana*. The scientific name often gives you additional information about the plant like country of origin (*Chinensis*), leaf characteristics (*tridentata* or little tridents), discoverer's name latinized (*Fendlera*), or favorite locations (*rupicola* which means rock loving). If someone gives you the scientific name and you find the matching plant, you can be sure it's the same one. If they give you the common name, you may or may not find the right plant. Common names differ by parts of the country. Some plants like sage might be an *artemesia*, *salvia*, or even something like Russian sage. An "x" in the name means it's a hybrid and the grower has "created" it by combining several plants and then cloning them for production

I've noticed that Home Depot no longer carries the scientific name on their plant tags and for that reason I won't buy from them. They assume most people don't care for anything but the common name and as we know that can be confusing.

Amount of **sun** the plant accepts is sometimes shown as **light** requirements. It is typically something like: full sun, part sun, part shade, morning sun or even full sun to partial shade. The sun requirements can be misleading for New Mexico unless the tag comes from a regional grower (e.g. High Country Gardens). New Mexico sun, at altitude, is much stronger than sun elsewhere so full sun often means morning sun here.

**Height** tells you the estimated mature height of the plant. It can be in inches or feet depending on the plant. I like to see **width** or **space** specified as well because some plants grow very wide. Width represents the diameter of the plant at maturity. Size is important because it is so easy to place a plant in the wrong size space which requires you to mutilate (prune) the plant over its life. Place the plant in a space that can hold it at maturity and there's little to no pruning. For trees and shrubs this is critical. So many people think the plant will always stay the same size as it was in the pot. Plants grow and increase in size and if you place them well, you should have minimal pruning. If you don't read anything else on the tag, pay attention to the mature size!

**Spacing** designates how much room you need to leave between plants when you're planting more than one of them. It's most useful for vegetables and bedding plants.

**Cold hardiness** is another critical item to check. If there is no zone on the label, consider the plant an annual because it probably will not overwinter. Cold hardiness is designated by the USDA Hardiness zone or lowest temperature the plant can withstand. We are in USDA Hardiness zone 7a and our typical low in winter is between 0 and 5 degrees F (foothills); 7b is 5 to 10 degrees and represents the valley. The USDA has color coded the zones on a map of the U.S. Numbers less than 7 represent colder lows; numbers greater than 7 represent warmer lows than zone 7. So if the plant tag shows zone 8-10 (10 to 15 degrees F) for cold hardiness, the plant often freezes in zone 7 when our nightly low goes below 15. Cold hardiness is sometimes shown on the tag as a range of the typical low temperature. Knowing your zone number means you don't have to remember how low it typically gets in Albuquerque. You can cheat when you buy plants by one zone (i.e. using a zone 8 plant in zone 7) by placing it in a microclimate which is warmer during winter than other areas of your landscape.

**Soil** is the final item usually found on the tag. By soil they mean does the plant prefer well-draining soil (not clay) and/or should it include organic matter. This does not tell you if the plant prefers acid soil. If you know where the plant grows natively, you can get a sense for this. Plants with the name *Japonica* (Japan) like azaleas and camellias, prefer acidic soil. Their leaves will turn yellow in the center with veins in dark green because in alkaline soil these plants can't take up iron. You'll need to add iron that's shown as FeEDDHA to your soil and even then you'll be watering the plant with alkaline water so it's hard to create the right environment for acid loving plants. If you see the word Loam under soil, then add compost or other organic matter into the soil before planting. Work it into an area that's twice the diameter of the plant.

One item that's often omitted on the tag is the **watering** requirements. This is probably omitted because the frequency of watering is dependent on your type of soil: less often for clay, more often for sand or decomposed granite. The ABQWUA includes how much water a plant needs in their chart of xeric plants. **Water**, if provided, is usually specified as Low, Moderate, or High. Grouping plants by water needs is useful in your landscape and for pots.

Other items on the tag are nice to have, but don't occur consistently across tags. They include Care, Fertilization, Pruning, Features, Uses, Growth Rate, Blooms, and Pairs With or companion plants.

Thank you Camille Singaraju for providing the idea for this article. I can always use the help.