

DECIPHERING GARDENSPEAK

Cindy Murray

Ready to embark on some high altitude gardening and landscaping projects? If so, you may benefit by becoming familiar with a few key terms.

First, let's talk about the *growing season*, which is loosely defined as, “the number of days between the last killing frost of spring and the first killing frost of fall.” Coconino County comprises a multitude of growing seasons. For example, the neighborhoods near Mt. Eldon may enjoy a growing season of over 130 days, while Baderville has around thirty days. Flagstaff averages ninety days in which frost-sensitive plants thrive. So, if you're planning on seeding a vegetable garden directly into the ground, be sure to check the seed packet label for the number of days to harvest and whether that particular plant will tolerate frost.

You *can* fool Mother Nature, though, by using *season extending* practices. One simple method is to start seeds indoors and plant them outdoors once the possibility of frost has passed (typically June 10-15 in Flagstaff). I'm able to transplant tomatoes and peppers in May by surrounding each plant with “Walls-O-Water.” Many gardeners plant early by utilizing row covers, cold frames, and/or hoop houses. Our local

nurseries have a wealth of knowledge and supplies pertaining to the subject.

Tying in closely with growing season is the *hardiness zone*. Based on the average annual minimum temperature, it serves as a standard to determine a plant's likelihood to survive the winter. For example, Flagstaff is rated as a zone 6 because many of our neighborhoods experience a lowest low in any given winter between 0 degrees F and -10 degrees F. But because it only takes a couple nights of abnormal lows, which can decimate my cherished trees or shrubs, I select specimens labeled zone 5 or lower. To find a map of the various hardiness zones in Arizona, go to www.plantmaps.com/interactive-arizona.

While housing the largest stand of Ponderosa pine in the world, our region is, nonetheless, classified a *high desert* due to lack of abundant precipitation. The sparse rainfall, low humidity, and high winds of spring and early summer can desiccate your daisies before you know it. Additionally, many communities of Coconino County are faced with water restrictions and high water rates. Experienced gardeners have found ways to combat these hindrances. *Mulch* is essentially a blanket of organic or inorganic materials applied on top of the soil for the purposes of conserving soil moisture, protecting roots from temperature fluctuation, and controlling weeds. We gardeners generally spread organic mulch at the base of plants during the growing season. You may purchase

ready-made mulch, or you can be creative using materials such as newspaper (without color inserts or red ink), leaves, grass clippings, and pine needles. In the winter you may apply inorganic mulch like clean cinders to prevent heat loss.

Another way horticulturalists counteract dry conditions is to employ *Xeriscaping*, a method of landscaping that is fashioned to deal with low moisture and to conserve water. We specifically seek out specimens that are *drought tolerant*, meaning they're able to withstand long periods with little or no water. There are countless varieties of drought tolerant trees, shrubs, and flowers that you may use to create a harmonious, colorful and attractive xeriscape.

You've all heard of the term *monsoon*, but what is it, really? The monsoon of the American Southwest is a seasonal shift in wind from mostly westerly to mostly southeasterly. Uneven summer heating between southwestern deserts and the oceans causes masses of air at sea to load up on moisture and head north. A combination of ground level solar heating and mountain barriers forces the air upward where its water vapor cools, condenses, and builds thunderheads. The resulting powerful summer storms may replenish parched soils in a matter of minutes. My garden and I are in our glory this time of year. There's nothing quite like a cool afternoon downpour to rejuvenate both the earth and the human spirit. These are the days I take a moment to gaze across my flourishing

landscape and know that the extra effort required for cultivating in the mountains is absolutely worth it.

Cindy Murray who has written frequently for Gardening Etcetera is a biologist, substitute elementary teacher, and a Master Gardener. Dana Prom Smith and Freddi Steele edit Gardening Etcetera for the Arizona Daily Sun.. Smith blogs at <http://highcountrygardener.blogspot.com> and can be emailed at stpauls@npgcable.com.