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The USDA Unveils a New Plant Hardiness Zone Map

When you start planning what to put in your garden or lawn, one of your main tools is the U.S. Plant Hardiness Zone Map (PHZM) created by the USDA. The map labels every area in the U.S. on a scale of 1 to 13, with each zone broken into half zones, designated by “a” and “b” (e.g., 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, and so on). They base these zones on 30 year-averages of weather and lowest annual winter temperatures, with 1a resembling the warmest, and 13b the coolest. Since plants can have very specific growing requirements, the map helps us to determine what will thrive in our lawns, gardens, and landscapes. Every time you buy a plant or seed packet, odds are there is a label that tells you which zones it does best in. These maps save us a lot of headaches when it comes time to select plants for our gardens and landscapes.

The PHZM has always been an evolving project. The first maps for the US came from the Arnold Arboretum in the 1920s, and researchers at the Arboretum published a few updates over the following decades. Then, in the 1960s, the USDA published their first PHZM, and have continued to updated it as more detailed information became available. The USDA published an update in 2012, which has been our standard map for the last 11 years.

This past Wednesday, however, the USDA released a new version of the PHZM. Significantly, the USDA notes that this new map incorporates a larger amount of data: “the 2023 map incorporates data from 13,412 weather stations compared to the 7,983 that were used for the 2012 map.” The new data set has shifted the hardiness zones across most of the U.S to a warmer zone, often by half a zone. Nemaha County moved from zone 5b to 6a. Jackson County, which used to be primarily zone 6a, is now split, with the northern half of the county in zone 6a and the southern half in 6b. Jefferson County, which was zone 6a, is now almost all 6b, with the northeastern portion remaining in 6a.

As you sit down to plan out next year’s garden or landscape improvements, take into consideration the shift in your Plant Hardiness Zone. The updated map can be found on <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov>, and, as with the last map, is interactive so you can zoom into your state and county for greater detail. If you have questions on what will grow in your zone, do not hesitate to reach out to your local extension office for more guidance!