

Zoning In on the Right Plants

Area warms up to hardier flowers, trees

By Celeste Hadrick

STAFF WRITER

It may seem hard to believe given this year's persistent winter, but Long Island and Queens don't get as consistently cold as they once did. And that means gardeners can take more chances, cultivating plants that in the past were not considered hardy enough to survive the area's freezes.

During the 1970s and early '80s, low temperatures averaged between 0 and 5 degrees below down the spine of the Island. Along the coastlines and in the city, minimum temperatures were a little higher, generally falling between 0 and 5 degrees above.

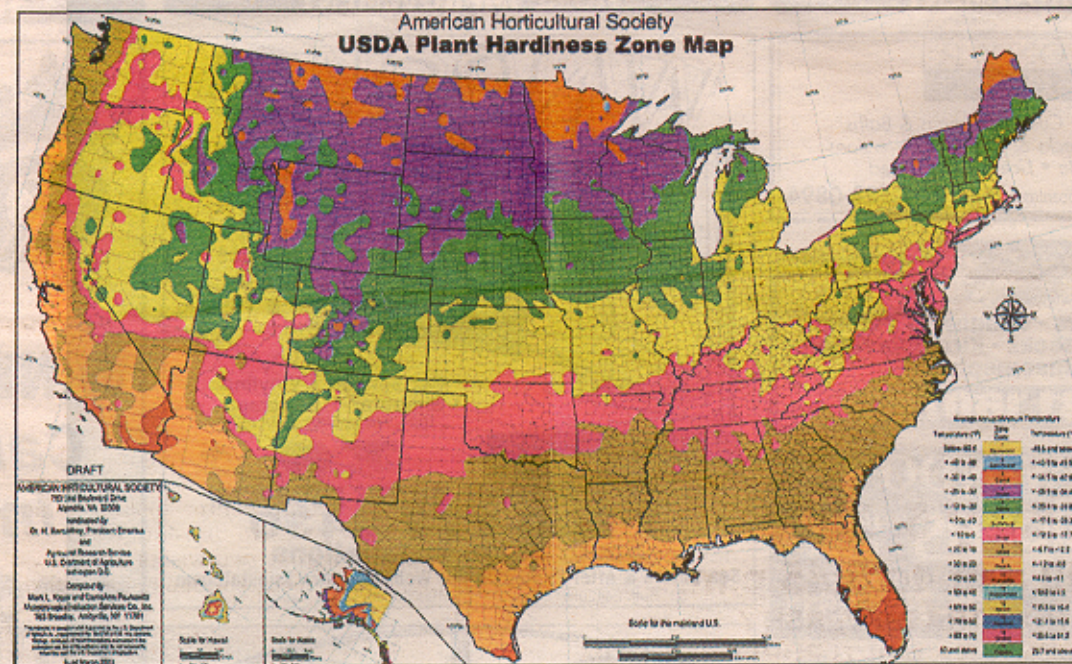
No more. Two meteorologists in Amityville collected the lowest temperatures reported from 11 weather stations on Long Island, Brooklyn and Queens from 1986 through 2002 and found the weather has warmed up lately. Now the average minimum temperatures for all of Long Island and New York City run between 0 and 10 degrees above.

Which plants can grow in which regions was the whole point of the study done by meteorologists Mark L. Kramer and CarrieAnn Paukowits of the Meteorological Evaluation Services Co. of Amityville.

Partnered with the American Horticultural Society and funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, the two analyzed weather not just on Long Island but also through the 50 states to come up with a new plant-hardiness zone map. That map has long been the blueprint serious gardeners use when deciding which varieties of flowers, bulbs and trees will flourish.

The results, still in draft form, should be made official within days. And then, by visiting the American Horticultural Society Web site at www.ahs.org, gardeners will be able to determine by ZIP code which zone they are in.

"Compared to the old map, it's a much clearer, vivid depiction of the zones within the state borders," Kramer said. "When and if the draft



Mark L. Kramer and CarrieAnn Paukowits, below, helped update the plant-hardiness map, above. All of Long Island and Queens are now in Zone 7.



Newsday Photo / Ken Spencer

map is put up on the Web, individuals will have the opportunity, which they didn't have in the previous

USDA hardiness map, to zoom in and get a clear picture of which zone they live in or what zone a given area is in. So if someone is contemplating buying property in eastern Long Island by the seashore and lives in upstate New York, they will easily be able, on a computer, to determine what hardiness-zone plants are appropriate."

Kramer and Paukowits reviewed temperatures from nearly 7,000 weather stations across the nation and used low readings from 4,600 stations to chart the map's 15 color-coded zones, which include four tropical zones in Hawaii that were not part of past plant-hardiness maps.

H. Marc Cathey, president emeritus of the horticultural society and coordinator of the mapping project, said the first plant-hardiness map in 1965 followed a period of relatively

mild winters. He and Kramer teamed up to produce a new map in 1990 after noticing that the winters during the 1970s and early '80s seemed colder than what the first map suggested.

While the 1990 map found that the country had turned cooler, the new map has mixed results. Some areas, such as Chicago, Phoenix and the northeastern coast of Florida, got warmer, while other places, such as Nebraska, got colder.

On the 1990 map, Long Island was classified as Zone 7a (low temperatures from 0 to 5 above) along the shorelines and Zone 6b (5 degrees below to 0) in the middle of the Island. Queens was classified entirely as 7a.

The new map makes all of Long Island and Queens Zone 7 (from 0 to 10 degrees), which is colored rose. The "a" and "b" classifications were dropped from the new map because they were too confusing, Cathey said.

The area's new classification doesn't mean that all low temperatures on Long Island stayed within Zone 7 limits, just their averages. For example, the lowest temperature recorded at Islip's MacArthur Airport last winter was 15 degrees while the coldest during the 16 years monitored was minus 7 during the winter of 1987-88, Paukowits said.

"If you tell me that it's supposed to be warmer, I will try some of the more tropical bulbs," said Elaine Rubin, whose Ronkonkoma garden is in the middle of Long Island, where temperatures warmed up the most. "I'll try the more fragile ones."

Rubin prefers summer-flowering bulbs, particularly dahlias, to perennials or annuals. She will still have to dig up her favorite dahlias in the fall and store them over the winter in cool, but not freezing, temperatures. But other summer-flowering bulbs that are not hardy in Zone 6, such as acanthus, gladiolus, tigridia and sparaxis, could survive the winter in the ground in her Zone 7 garden if well mulched.

Paukowits said the new plant-hardiness map should assist gardeners and plant suppliers throughout the country. "I think it's going to help a lot of people."

THE POTTING SHED

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— Caryn Eve Murray



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