



FROM A GARDENING PERSPECTIVE...

HOW TO READ PLANT TAGS!

By

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There is nothing more enjoyable at the end of winter than going to the local nursery and choosing plants for the spring. Knowing how to interpret the tags on the plants is essential to making right choices. People expect that any plant sold at the nursery should be appropriate for their area...BUT NO!! Unless a nursery is dedicated to native plant material, many beautiful plants just won't survive after leaving the controlled environment.

All tags are different. Some give very little information, and some tell the whole story. So here are some basic things to look for on a plant tag:

Plant Name: First will be the common name, and then will be a Latin name. For example, a purple coneflower is *Echinacea purpurea*. The most common is *Echinacea purpurea* 'Magnus' which is the typical purple flower. However, *Echinacea purpurea* 'White Swan' is the same species, but has white flowers. The Latin name is the species of the plant, while the third word is the 'cultivar'. It is like dogs: all domestic dogs are *canis familiaris*, but the breeds look different. Cultivars are the 'breeds' of the plant world.

Photo of the Plant: Beware. The photos are usually overly flattering and don't always show you a good example of how the plant will look in your yard.

Overall description: Like the photos, the descriptions will often lead you to believe that the plant is much more amazing than it really is. Take these with a grain of salt.

Hardiness or Zone: Plants for Palo Pinto County should be hardy to zone 7b. If only one zone is listed, that is the coldest zone in which a plant can exist. By the way, zones range from 1-13 with 1 being the coldest and 13 the warmest. A zone 7 plant can handle most of the heat in the summer and can live through a cold spell to 5 degrees.

Water Requirements: For Palo Pinto County, this is the most important piece of information! Given all the plants that can survive zone 7b heat and cold, only a percentage of them can survive on minimal water. On a tag, there should be a symbol that looks like a drop of water. The more drops of water shown, the more water the plant requires. Choose plants that show half a drop or a drop with a slash through it. Mostly these plants will be Texas natives or native to regions of the world with a similar climate to Texas.

NOTE: Even the most drought tolerant plants need to be watered when they are first transplanted. Water lightly two or three times a week until new growth is noticed or until the plant visibly perks up. Then water only twice a month. Rain counts as watering.

Light Requirements: Plants need a certain amount of sun to thrive. Different plants need different amounts of sun. The tag should use words or symbols to show how much sun the plant needs. **Full Sun** means the plant needs at least 6 hours of sun per day. **Part Sun or Part Shade** means 3 to 6 hours of sunlight. **Shade or Full Shade** means less than 3 hours of sunlight.

Size: A mature height and width should be given. These are usually accurate, so plan accordingly. If the mature width of a shrub is 4 feet, be sure to plant it AT LEAST 2 feet away from the house or another plant that needs space.

The tag may give information about the shape of the plant, the growth rate and whether the plant is *invasive* or *self-sowing*. If a plant is invasive and fast growing, it needs a restricted place in which to do its thing.

This may seem like a lot of information, but reading the nursery tag is essential to making good choices for the landscape. If you have questions, contact the Palo Pinto Master Gardeners at the Extension Office, (940) 659-1228.