

# One Zone Does Not Fit All

Climate Change on the Hill

BY CHERYL CORSON



On a recent balmy evening, I linger over the intense fragrance emanating from a nearby eucalyptus tree. Am I in the Berkeley Hills? No. I'm on Capitol Hill (on C Street, NE). When I first heard about this tree in 2003, I bicycled right over to see it. And in 2012, after Snowmageddon, several big hurricanes, an earthquake, and the fourth warmest winter on record, it's doing just fine. In fact, it's nearly 20 feet tall. A large prickly pear cactus and a yucca plant grow in front of it. Don't tell the tree it shouldn't grow here.

## Experts & Empiricists

There are scientists and then there are gardeners. While not mutually exclusive, the former will say there is a difference between climate, which spans long time frames, and weather, which is more immediate. Gardeners, on the other hand, will tell you that plants that couldn't be grown here twenty years ago without special care, now do well due to warmer temperatures. Both will acknowledge that extreme weather events are also becoming more frequent.

Experts, like Dr. Catherine Woteki, USDA Under Secretary of Research, Education and Economics, and a Hill resident and gardener, will point you to the newly released USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, updated for the first time since 1990. This map has an online interactive feature that shows more detail than the static maps. With it, you can see that although much of Washington, DC is considered "Zone 7a," the next warmest "Zone 7b" now covers the Potomac and Anacostia rivers, including a pocket or two on Capitol Hill. (see: <http://www.planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/>)

Tony Avent, of Plant Delights

Nursery in Raleigh, NC, cautions that while the USDA Hardiness Zone map is based on average winter low temperatures, it doesn't take rare extremes into account. Still, he sees the new map as a dramatic improvement due to the inclusion of a larger (30 year) temperature data set and many more recording stations. An excellent discussion of the ins and outs of hardiness zones may be found on the back page of the informative and fun Plant Delights catalogue. (see: [www.plantdelights.com](http://www.plantdelights.com))

## Micro-Climate Manipulation & More

The best way to "cheat the zone" if you wish to grow plants on the margins of their hardiness is to create or utilize micro-climates. These are areas of your garden that are particularly protected, receive reflected heat from a brick or stone wall, or are just on the south side of the street, out in the open. Observe your site in various seasons and really learn about its light and wind exposure and drainage. Armed with this information, you can usually "squeeze out an extra zone," as Tony Avent says. This is what our friends did with that eucalyptus tree.

But micro-climate only goes so far. Daniel Mullins, of the local Deep Roots Landscape Company, cautions that the increase in weather volatility as a result of climate change will be a more salient factor than mild temperature increases in years to come. To cope with this volatility, he advises that plants which are, "properly planted, pruned, and mulched are better equipped to handle extreme weather conditions. Proper mulching can reduce erosion and protect plants during heavy downpours as well as retain soil moisture when dry conditions persist." Mullins also encourages deep watering, which produces deeply root-

ed plants that are much less susceptible to drought.

### Celebrate the Heat

We can now grow figs, camellias, Chindo viburnums (a personal favorite) without winter protection. But there is an entire category of plants that also love our new weather (or is it climate?) – tropicals! These are plants that still need extra winter care, like being brought indoors, but can be enjoyed outdoors for more weeks of the year than in the past.

Christine Moschetti, Live Goods Manager at Frager's Hardware is just the person to see if you want to grow bouganvillea, tropical ginger, birds of paradise and tropical hibiscus. She comes to DC after 28 years on Maui, and still visits her ancestral Italy every year, so she's got a real feel for the Mediterranean climate as well. She loves tropical plants, and has even brought a mahogany tree to Frager's Nursery as an experiment.

Moschetti has noticed a Pennsylvania Avenue restaurant that has already brought some of its potted tropicals outdoors after being wintered over inside. She points out the difference between tropical and perennial (native) hibiscus, which can be planted in the ground and will come back year after year. "If you've got the indoor space for wintering them over, think of trying lemons or oranges," she suggests, "their fragrance is intoxicating." When I ask if she can imagine olive trees on Capitol Hill, she laughs and says, "maybe not yet, but who knows?!"

*Cheryl Corson (www.cherylcorsan.com) is a landscape architect who has worked on the Hill since 1998. ★*

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