



## Get To Know Your Yard and Choose The Right Plants

By Christine Hollenbeck

Your yard will have numerous microclimates. A microclimate is a particular set of growing conditions that will affect how well plants grow in a given area. The microclimate will be affected by light exposure, humidity, soil type, air movement and other localized factors.

Start with the light exposure around your yard. Break the yard up into four sections; north, south, east and west. What kind of light is available in each of these areas throughout the day, bright sunlight, filtered sunlight, or shade? May be you have areas that have sun during one part of the day and not during another. Remember, morning sunlight is cool sunlight and any sunlight after noon or one o'clock is considered hot sun light.

What kind of soil do you have in your yard? There are three basic types of soil:

### Fine-textured soils

Fine-textured soils consist mostly of clay. These soils will have varied mixtures of clay and silt, clay and sand, clay and loam, and silty clay loam. Clay soils are sticky when wet.

### Medium-textured soils

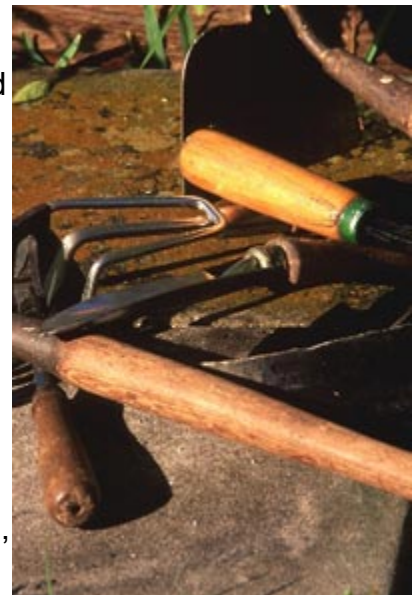
Medium-textured soils in order of fine to coarse consist of sandy clay \*loam, loam, \*silt loam, and just silt.

\*silt: silt particles are silky or powdery to the touch.

\*loam: an equal mix of sand, silt, and clay.

### Coarse-textured soils

In order of medium texture to coarse are sandy loam, loamy sand, and sand.



It is important to understand the basic characteristics of your soil. This information is directly related to how you will water your garden and lawn. The finer the soil the slower the water will penetrate, and the wetter the soil will remain after being soaked. This could cause rotting problems with some plants.

The coarser the soil the faster water runs through, and the faster the soil will dry out. This can mean frequent watering.

With all soil types, amending the soil with one to two inches of organic materials once a year will improve and maintain the health of the soil.

Now that you understand the light exposure in your yard and the soil type or types you are dealing with, let's talk about plants.

What kind of plants would you like to have in your yard? How will they fit into the microclimates you have defined around your yard? If you do not have any specific plants in mind, take the information on light exposure, soil type/types and naturally available water in your microclimates to your local nursery and ask what plants will do best in these conditions.

Don't forget, your yard is broken up into four different areas and the plants will differ in each.

If you have a good idea of what plants you like, developed a list. Do these plants fit the requirements of the microclimate you have chosen for them?

Things to know about choosing the right plant for you yard.

### Zones

All plants have a zone rating. According to the United States Department of Agriculture the Willamette Valley including the Portland metro area is rated a zone 6. This means the plants with this rating are hardy enough to survive winter temperatures as low as 0 to minus 10 degrees F. Plants rated a zone 8 or lower can also be planted in our area. A zone 8 rating means the plants are hardy enough to survive low temperatures which range from 29 to 13 degrees F. In colder weather these plants will need to be covered with mulch to protect the roots.

You can choose any plant which is rated a zone 8 or lower, such as a zone 5 or a zone 1. The lower the zone number, the colder the winter temperatures the plant can survive. If you choose a plant with a zone rating number higher than 8 the plant may die in the winter do to freezing.

### Annuals and Perennials

Annuals are plants that only live one growing season. They will die in the winter and not come back the next spring. There are the few exceptions that will live through a mild winter. Most annuals are planted to add instant color to a garden and to plant in decorative pots.

Perennials are plants that will die back in the winter (meaning the top growth will die) but the root is still alive. Perennials come back every year and will grow larger every year. These plants along with trees and shrubs have the zone rating discussed earlier. Remember to choose plants that have a zone rating number of 8 or lower.

### Turf

Like other plants turf grass has specific requirements. Zone ratings, soil textures, light

exposure, and available water are all things to be taking into consideration when planting a lawn. Choose a grass which matches the existing conditions of the area in which it is going to be planted.

### Plants and Water Requirements

When choosing plants, know what the water requirement is for each plant. Is the plant drought tolerant? Will it do well in soils with little natural water? If the area you have chosen for this type of plant is wet, the plant would likely struggle and possibly rot. This type of plant will thrive in the medium to coarse soil textures.

If you have chosen a plant which requires more water, or may be a bog type of environment, this plant would do well in the fine to medium soil textures and thrive in areas which are naturally wet.

Most plants have tags on them at the time of the purchase which will tell you the zone, maximum height and width, recommended light exposure, and water requirements.

The trick to planting a "Water Wise" garden is to plant plants where the microclimate provides what the plant needs. Gather a list of plants that will do well in each section (north, south, east, and west) of your yard. Remember; always take into consideration the light exposure, soil type, and natural water available to the area.

Following these guidelines, you will be able to plant a beautiful, sometimes unusual, and "Water Wise" landscape.

### **About the Author**

Christine works for Oak Lodge Water District as their Cross Connection Coordinator and Water Conservation Specialist. In addition to this, she has worked in commercial and private plant nurseries and the commercial landscape field. Christine has always had a love for plants, gardening and the environment.