

HEATHERS FOR COLOUR ALL YEAR AND YEAR AFTER YEAR

Bryan Taylor Spring 2014

A: PLANT DATABASE:

Nursery labels should be your source of basic plant info. Size, flower time and colour. There are so few other sources (on-line or in print) that it is almost futile searching.

B: MAXIMISE YEAR ROUND INTEREST BY USING VARIETIES WITH STRONG FOLIAGE COLOUR IN YOUR PLAN:

Callunas are generally far more interesting for their foliage than flowers. This feature is invaluable in planning a heather planting. Some *Ericas* also have foliage other than green.

C: DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A HEATHER GARDEN AND A COMPANION PLANTING:

Mass plantings of heathers (a heather garden) is best using summer blooming heathers. Something is needed to break the rigid repetitious pattern and grasses do a wonderful job. Try moor grass, feather grass, and sedges (*Carex*). Winter blooming heathers include very long flowering varieties (*Erica x darleyensis*) and they make great companion plants in the garden (including mixed in with the summer flowering mass heather plantings). *Darleyensis* make very poor mass plantings just by themselves and many varieties can grow quite large so take this into account from the start (read the labels).

D: PRUNING FOR FLOWER PRODUCTION:

Prune in the spring to remove old flowers. Some callunas with strong foliage colour will flower very sparsely so only prune to tidy them up - if at all. Pruning is always to induce flowering so it's pointless if there will be no flowers. *Darleyensis* set flower buds very early. Correct pruning will usually result in the removal of the last of the flowers but painful though this is, it will get results. Never cut back so much that you do not leave some foliage along the stems. Heathers cannot be constrained by pruning and will not make hedges.

Some very tall *Ericas* called tree heaths are total exceptions to the pruning rules. They can be shaped at will including cutting into old, leafless growth.

E: SITING CONSIDERATIONS:

Heathers can tolerate some shade although their native habitat is treeless. Bright foliage colours are never developed in the shade. Flower production may also suffer in the shade. Life expectancy is 20 years. Be prepared to move and to replace plants. Moving in October or November is preferable.

F: GROWING CONDITIONS:

Heathers are not drought tolerant for the first five years of their lives and thereafter, only moderately tolerant of hot dry weather - use mulch. They are absolutely intolerant of manure. Very light applications of rhodo/azalea fertilizer are good. Make sure you do have acid conditions before starting out. It is unwise to believe folk law concerning acidic west coast soils. Many local soils are not acidic as a result of previous agricultural use. Aim for pH 5.5 if you are keen on growing outstanding callunas. Use aluminum sulphate to acidify.

G: YEAR ROUND COLOUR:

You can get year round colour and almost year round flowering by careful choice of plants. Heathers retain their leaves year round. Callunas usually flower in August - they often have

superb foliage colours all year. The new bud blooming callunas start flowering just a little later and go on to the end of November. If you grow these then group them for best effect. There are many exciting bud bloomer offerings at almost all the local nurseries.

There are Ericas that flower summer and winter. A few have great foliage interest too. The Erica hybrid called "darleyensis" by heather enthusiasts can flower from December to May and is by far the best choice for winter colour. The winter flowering Erica carnea is a very low plant with spreading habit. It can be used in rockeries but with this exception, there is no compelling reason to grow this species. When it's not flowering it doesn't usually look good. If you do buy it, choose varieties that flower for 4 months. Don't buy ones that flower for a shorter time. Finally, Daboecias flower from mid-summer until very late fall. They have larger flowers than other heathers. Their leaves are always green and the shrub is always attractive in flower or not.

H: DISEASE CONSIDERATIONS:

Heathers are quite disease resistant. They are truly deer-proof. Water-borne fungal diseases are sometimes a problem and can usually be traced to irrigation practices. Water at sunrise, not sunset for example. Crowding, particularly of callunas, can result in rapid spread of fungal attacks. Do not attempt to spray or treat such occurrences. Just deal with the probable cause, throw the plant away and get another one - maybe a different variety (same species) as there is enormous variation of sensitivity to disease .

I: PROPAGATION:

Propagating heathers is easy. Cuttings (2 to 3 cm) should be taken in the fall. No rooting hormone needed. Strip the lower leaves and insert into a mix of equal parts agricultural vermiculite and washed sand. You have to wash the sand regardless of what the bag may say. Wash it very well. Cover the container with saran wrap and set outside in deep shade until spring. You may have to water it occasionally and in any case, a little fresh air every month or so will be good. Heathers do not suffer mildew so the closed cover is no problem. Prick out to a mix of peat with 10% washed sand. Gradually introduce to full sun and fertilize once with slow release pellets. (NPK ratio about 1:1:1)

J: WHERE TO BUY:

Local nurseries are not all that well informed on heathers although one or two do have interesting varieties on offer at times. The best source locally is the sale by the Vancouver Island Heather Society at either Mill Bay or Coble Hill. It is always announced in the Times Colonist. Their plants come from "The Heather Farm" at Chilliwack which also has direct sales. Google it for more info.

Government House Plant Nursery also has a spring plant sale (first Tuesday in June) with very special heathers included. These local heather sales with such special varieties sell out fast.

QUESTIONS:

I will do my best to answer questions sent by e-mail to taylorinvictoria@gmail.com