



Spring HOME GUIDE

Know Your Zones
Growing zones are important to know when planting

Get Your HVAC Ready
There's some maintenance needed before using your A/C

Power Washing Basics
Few things are more satisfying than washing off winter grime



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Know Your Zones

Sometimes, it's not that you have a black thumb. Maybe you've been buying the wrong plants for your USDA growing zone.

The growing zones are a temperature minimums for your area, ranging from the coldest — 1a, or -60 to -55 degrees Fahrenheit — to 13b, or 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

Each zone represents the mean extreme minimum temperature — meaning it's the average coldest temperature. It does not mean that that's the coldest

it's ever been or ever will be. You should still prepare for somewhat colder temperatures than what is shown on the map.

FINDING YOUR ZONE

You can find your USDA growing zone by going to the interactive GIS map at planthardiness.ars.usda.gov and entering your ZIP code.

If you don't have a broadband Internet connection, you can also find static images that will load better on your connection. Experts at your local garden center or agricultural extension office will also be able to tell you your hardiness zone.

NEW DATA MEANS NEW ZONES

This is the first time the USDA has offered the upgraded GIS map, and it's been updated with data from 1976-2005. GIS technology has a higher level of resolution and can show smaller areas of zone definition than previous iterations of the map. It may show, for example, a warmer zone around a larger city because cities tend to hold more heat than rural areas or a cool spot around a hill and valley.

The new map also has new zones. Zones 12 and 13 have annual extreme minimum temperatures above 50 and 60 degrees, respectively. You can find

these zones in Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Even though these zones do not include a freeze, they will enable gardeners in these areas to plan for conditions to suit tropical and semitropical plants.

ZONES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

What you shouldn't use the zones map for is any evidence of climate change. Climate changes usually show up in records for 50 years or more. Because the zone map uses 30 years of data, it shouldn't be considered reliable evidence of whether or not there is global warming. ■



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Get Your HVAC Ready Before the Heat Returns

As the mercury starts to creep up after winter's chill, you might start to be tempted to kick on the air conditioner to cool down the inside of your home.

But before you reach for the thermostat, there's some maintenance you need to do to ensure a summer free of HVAC catastrophes.

CLEAN IT UP

After a winter running the furnace, call an HVAC professional to have your air ducts professionally cleaned out. Clear ducts means the cool air from your HVAC moves more efficiently around your house and without spreading dust, dander, mold, mildew, fungi or anything else.

You should also change your air filters at least every 30 days for most filtration systems (check your HVAC owners manual or the instructions on the filter). Dirty filters will overwork your HVAC and shorten the life of your system. It also won't work as well, meaning you'll be paying higher utility bills.

While you're cleaning out, you want to check your outdoor components as well. Clear out leaves, branches and sticks from the equipment before kicking it on for the year. You may even find some small creatures have made their home inside your HVAC unit. Be careful when clearing out debris not to bend or break any of the metal fins on your condenser unit. ■

LOOK FOR LEAKS AND CRACKS

Check around the inside and outside parts of your HVAC and look for any leaks or cracks. Also keep an eye out for any unusual corrosion. If you see anything suspicious, have the HVAC technician out before turning on your system.

Finally, if it's passed every other test, turn on your A/C and make sure it's blowing an accurate temperature out of the air ducts in every room. Make sure the registers are all open, even if you rarely use that room, and look for any abnormalities inside and out.

You can also have a technician come out for a routine check of your system before turning it on for the year. Some companies even offer service plans that make this more cost effective and repairs less stressful.



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Power Washing Basics

Few things are more satisfying than washing off a coat of winter grime with a power washer. You can use them on windows, walls, pools, driveways, walkways, grills, outdoor furniture, fences, vehicles, decks and more.

There are some safety rules you should keep in mind. Let's get started.

ABOUT POWER WASHERS

Power washers are either electric or gas. The gas units tend to be more powerful than electric ones, delivering up to 3,000 pounds per square inch of pressure. Make sure you match the material you're washing to the power of your equipment.

Home Depot says that vinyl siding can take up to 3,000 psi while aluminum, stucco or soft-grain woods should get no more than 1,500 psi. There are also a variety of wands and attachments to make your job easier.

RENT OR BUY?

Many home stores will rent the power washing gear that you need so that you don't have to buy equipment of your own. This is an ideal situation if you're going to do projects like your home, driveway and deck, say, once a year. If you're going to wash your vehicles often or need to do several jobs a year, consider buying either an electric or gas washer to meet your needs.



PREPARE THE AREA

Before you start washing, cover items such as light fixtures and air conditioner compressors on the exterior of a home. Also cover any

plants that are close to whatever you're going to power wash. Make sure to note the locations of windows and electrical outlets. Cover the sockets with tape and

avoid them while washing. Pre-scrub the exterior with a scrub brush or spray it down with a garden hose to remove dirt, debris and mildew.

You also want to don your safety gear before turning on your power washer. Use safety goggles and work gloves. Never use a ladder while power washing because the pressure could cause you to lose your balance. Keep the power washer wand at least six feet away from wires. Don't spray into outlets, cracks and holes. Do not point the power washer at people or pets.

CLEANING

Mix the detergent and water according to manufacturer directions. Attach the washer to your garden hose. Then, attach the wand you want to use to your sprayer. Step back three feet and test the power washer against your surface, adjusting the pressure until you can remove dirt without damaging the surface.

Once you're done, turn off the washer and disconnect it from the hose. Follow the manufacturer's directions for proper storage and use the garden hose to rinse any excess soap. Remove any protective tarps and leave your item to dry. ■



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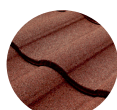
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