



Plant and Garden Terms You Should Know

These are some of the most common words that landscapers, gardeners and garden center workers use.

Amendments – what is added to the soil to enrich it. Compost, fertilizers, and organic materials such as alfalfa are all soil amendments.

Annual – plants that complete their life cycle in one year or less. These don't usually live through the winter. Many annuals do bloom all summer long.

Balled and Burlapped (B&B) – shrubs and trees that were field grown and then dug out of the soil. The roots and soil around them are wrapped in burlap. Remove all wire, burlap and cords when you plant.

Biennial – flowers and vegetables that complete their life cycle in two years. Biennials typically grow one year, bloom the next, and then they die.

Bolting – when a vegetable goes quickly into flower and seed. Cool weather plants such as lettuce are prone to bolting when summer days get hot.

Broadleaf Evergreen – a shrub or tree that keeps its leaves through the winter, but doesn't have needles. Rhododendrons and holly are broadleaf evergreens.

Coming True From Seed – a term used to describe when the seeds from a plant will produce offspring with the same characteristics. Seeds from hybrids often don't "come true" in that the seedlings are different from the parents.

Common Name – a name given to a plant that's usually different from its scientific name. Several plants can share the same common name, so confusion can happen. Example: "Vinca" is a name used for a flowering annual as well as the window-box vine and evergreen groundcover.

Companion Planting – also called inter-cropping, this is a method of using specific combination of plants growing together to provide various benefits such as repelling pests, providing support, or attracting pollinators.

Compost – organic matter from broken down plant material, sometimes combined with aged manure.

Cover Crop – a fast growing plant that is grown to hold soil in place over the winter and to improve the ground. Winter or annual rye are typical cover crops. These are usually turned into the soil in the spring.

Cultivar – a plant that was selected (sometimes discovered in the wild) or bred for a particular look or feature. Such plants have a specific name added onto the scientific (genus and species) name. Cultivars are often chosen for mature size, larger flowers, fragrance or the look of the leaves.

Damping Off – when seedlings fall over and die when they are small. This is caused by a few different fungi and is most common when seeds are started in garden soil or the young plants are kept too wet.

Dappled Shade – a place where the sunlight peaks through the canopy of leaves above. Plants that thrive in full shade also do well in dappled shade.

Dead-head – cutting off fading flowers from trees, shrubs, perennials or annuals. Deadheading is done to improve appearance, remove developing seeds, or prompt the plant to make more flowers.

Determinate – a tomato variety that produces one large crop of fruit, and stops growing when that fruit is formed. These are shorter plants. Paste tomatoes and patio tomatoes are usually determinate types.

Deciduous – a woody plant (shrub or tree) that loses its leaves in the fall and grows new ones in the spring.

Disease Resistance – a variety that has less susceptibility to common diseases.

Drought Tolerant (or drought resistant) – plants that are able to survive or even thrive in dry soils.

Evergreen – a plant that keeps its foliage year ‘round. Evergreen plants can have needles or leaves. Some grass-like plants such as sedges and rushes are also evergreen. Plants with needles or scale-like leaves are also called conifers.

Fertilizer – products for adding nutrients and elements to the soil. Some fertilizers are called “complete” because they have the main nutrients and trace elements. Others have a single nutrient such as nitrogen or potassium, for use when a soil test shows that you’re lacking in that area. Fertilizers can be synthetic or organic, and are available in granular or liquid forms.

Frost Date – the average time when the first or last frost happens in a region. On Cape Cod the last frost date is in mid-May, and the first hard frost is in late Oct.

Full Sun – an area that gets at least 7 hours of direct sunlight, including 12 noon.

Fungicide – a product that is used to control fungal problems in the garden.

Genus – the first part of a plant’s scientific name. Plants can have the same genus name but look very different depending on their species and variety.

Germination – when a seed sprouts and starts to grow. Plants have a variety of germination times and requirements.

Harden Off – this refers to the process of exposing a young, indoor-grown plant to the out of doors. It’s usually done gradually, either by placing the plant outside in the day and in at night, or putting it out in the shade before moving to the sun.

Hardiness Zone – the USDA has divided the country into sections based on the average low winter temperature. Cape Cod is listed as a Zone 7 but many plants that are hardy in Zone 7 don’t thrive here. Plants for Zone 6 do well on Cape.

Heirloom – older varieties that have been open pollinated for years.

Hybrid – when two specific parent varieties are bred to get offspring that is different from the parent plants. Often, the seeds produced by hybrids will produce plants that resemble one of the parents.

Indeterminate – tomato varieties that continue to produce stems and flowers throughout the entire season. These plants grow tall, and will produce fruit until the plants are killed either by disease or hard frost.

Insecticide – a product that kills or controls insects in the garden.

Latin Name/Scientific Name – the unique name given to plants that is composed of the genus first and the species second. The benefit of these names is that there can't be any confusion and they are the same in all languages.

Loam – soil that is a mix of sand, silt and clay, often with humus/organic matter.

Macronutrients – the main elements needed for plant growth: nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium, calcium, magnesium and sulfur.

Male/Female Plants (Dioecious) – plants that only have male or female flowers. Examples are holly and bayberry. In order to have berries, you need both sexes.

Micro-climate – a small area in a landscape where the temperatures are warmer or colder. Protection from a house, exposure to winds, nearness to the ocean and slopes can create micro-climates.

Micronutrients – elements that are essential in small amounts for plant growth: boron, chlorine, copper, iron, manganese, molybdenum and zinc.

Mulch – materials spread over the surface of the soil to suppress weeds, hold in moisture, and if the mulch is organic, amend soil. Mulches are typically applied in a layer one to two inches thick. Examples include: chipped bark, hay, chopped leaves, seaweed, and stones.

Native – a plant that's indigenous to the area. Plants can be native to a specific small area, such as Cape Cod, or to broader regions such as the mid-Atlantic, Northeast, or all of North America.

Nitrogen-Fixing – when plants have the ability to take nitrogen from the air and turn it into stored nitrogen in the soil. This is facilitated by specialized bacteria that colonize on plant roots. Some common plants that are nitrogen-fixing include bayberry, clover, bearberry, peas, alfalfa and beach plum.

Organic – in a broad sense, this refers to being derived from living matter. It's also used to mean growing methods that don't use chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

Over-Wintering – keeping tender plants through the winter, indoors or out. Some annuals or tropicals can be over-wintered inside the house or a cool garage, while marginally hardy plants might be protected outside with a thick layer of mulch and/or wrapping.

Part Shade – about 4 hours of sun in the early morning or late afternoon.

Part Sun – about 4 hours of sun during the middle of the day, when the sun is strongest.

Perennial – plants that are cold hardy and have roots that live through the winter. Most perennials have foliage that dies to the ground in the winter but grow back from the roots in the spring. AKA “herbaceous perennials.”

Pinch – usually this means cutting off or otherwise removing the tips of plants, usually to encourage branching. Young annuals are often pinched to help them be more bushy and full.

pH – this is a measurement of how acidic or alkaline the soil is. A pH of 7 is considered neutral, while greater than 7 is alkaline and less is acidic. In general, potting soils are formulated to be neutral, and Cape Cod soils are naturally acidic.

Pollinators – this usually refers to insects and animals that pollinate plants, although the wind can also transport pollen in some cases. Pollinators can be bees, flies, wasps, beetles, ants, hummingbirds, or moths, to name just a few.

Pruning – cutting shrubs and trees to improve health and appearance. Pruning always stimulates growth, so it's usually not a good way to control a plant's size.

Root Bound – when a plant is grown in a container and the roots get so congested that they become crowded and fill the pot. When a potted plant gets too root bound, it usually needs a larger container and fresh soil.

Root Rot – when roots are too wet, they may be killed by different fungi. When roots are rotted, they usually turn brown, grey or black. Rotted roots can also

smell like a swamp. Plants that are over-watered and have root rot wilt, so they may look as if they are thirsty. Plants that grow well in wet soils are less prone to root rot, while those that prefer drier conditions are more likely to suffer.

Row Cover – sometimes called “floating row cover,” this is a light-weight, non-woven material that is most frequently used to protect vegetables from cold, insects or animal damage. Also used to cover soil while seeds germinate.

Scorch – when plants get too much sun. This is most likely to happen when plants are moved outside into direct sun after being in the house or coming directly from a greenhouse where they were raised. Plants can also get scorched by fertilizer or pesticides that are applied too heavily, or on hot sunny days.

Seedling – a young plant, newly grown from seeds.

Self-Sowing – plants that drop seeds in the yard and garden that go on to grow.

Soil Amendments – things that are added to improve the soil. Fertilizer, lime, compost, manure and other organic materials are added if needed to amend soil.

Species – the second part of the scientific name for a plant. For example, for the purple coneflower, the botanic or scientific name is *Echinacea purpurea*. *Echinacea* is the genus, and *purpurea* is the species. Often the species name describes a specific characteristic of a plant, or is derived from the person who first discovered or described that plant. Scientific names are always italicized.

Thinning – removing excess seedlings so that the remaining plants aren't too crowded. If young plants are growing too close to each other, none of them will get large. This is especially important with young annuals and vegetable plants.

Time-Release Fertilizer – a synthetic fertilizer that is encapsulated so that it is released gradually, usually over a period of between two to six months.

Topdressing – applying soil amendments such as compost, fertilizer or mulch on top of the soil, especially after plants have come up or a crop is established.

Topsoil – also called loam, this is soil that is a mix of sand, silt and clay, often with humus/organic matter. Topsoil is used to fill raised beds or for new gardens.

Transplant – moving a plant from one place to another. This can be from a small pot outside to a garden, or from one location in the ground to another.

Upright – a plant that naturally grows up not out wide because of its genetics.

Variiegated – when leaves have two or more colors in addition to green. Variiegated plants can have white, yellow, pink or other colors in their foliage.

Variety – a species that has formed/evolved with unique characteristics such as shape, size, flower color etc. These are often given a name in single quotes in their botanic name. *Echinacea purpurea* ‘Magnus’ for example. The flowers on this variety are larger with petals held flat, making it different from the species.

Volunteer – a plant that has appeared on its own in the garden. These can be seeded from plants nearby, or delivered by a bird or other animal. Volunteers can appear years after their parent plant died in a garden, or the seed was deposited by the wind or a passing animal.

Wet Feet – when a plant either grows well or dies when the soil is constantly damp. Many plants die when the soil is damp all winter, for example; these are referred to as “plants that don’t like wet feet.”

Worm Castings – the digested organic waste of red worms. These are nutrient dense and are used in houseplants, container gardens or as a soil amendment.

Xeriscape – a garden that is designed to withstand drought or to never be watered. Some have specific areas of their property designed for no watering.

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