

TIPS ON GROWING HEATHS AND HEATHERS IN NEWFOUNDLAND

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Heaths versus Heather

Novice gardeners often have difficulty distinguishing between heaths and heathers. Both of these plants are mostly native to Europe. While all hardy heaths and heathers are small, evergreen shrubs, there are distinct differences between the two groups.

All heathers are varieties of *Calluna vulgaris*. In Newfoundland the earliest varieties begin blooming in mid-August. Other varieties continue to bloom until killing frost. Plants bear small, scale-like leaves and the flowers, in shades of red, pink, purple or white, are shaped like minute bells. Double forms with miniature pompom-like flowers also exist. Foliage is typically a dull green, but many varieties sport bright green, yellow, reddish or even brownish foliage. Some varieties have grey, hairy leaves while most have smooth foliage. Growth habit may be upright or prostrate.



Calluna vulgaris 'Spring Cream'

Heaths are available in many species and hybrids, but not all are hardy in Newfoundland. The typical spring-blooming heaths are varieties of *Erica carnea*. These heaths bloom from April to June. Their flower-buds are produced in the fall and may even bloom during mild winter spells. Flowers may be white, purplish-red or pink and are more urn-shaped rather than bell-shaped. The leaves are like miniature conifer needles and are light to dark green, yellow or rarely reddish. They are always smooth in texture. Plants produce mat-like growths. Closely related to *Erica carnea* and nearly indistinguishable is the hybrid *Erica X darleyensis*.



Erica carnea 'Vivelli'

The cross-heath, *Erica tetralix*, is another hardy heath. This species blooms in early August and has an upright stem with grey-green, hairy needles. The rounded flowers are borne on the tips of stems and may be purplish-pink or white. Another choice is *Erica vagans*, a species whose brilliant magenta, tiny, globular flowers are produced anytime between July and October.

Closely related to heaths and heathers, and wonderful companions for them, are species of *Cassiope*, the white bell heather and *Phyllodoce*, the mountain heather. Both of these are June-bloomers. The former has small nodding white

bells while the latter has white or purple urn-shaped flowers. They are both more challenging to grow than the standard heaths and heathers.



Erica tetralix 'Con Underwood'



Phyllodoce glanduliflora

Growing Requirements

Heaths, heathers, and their relatives prefer a climate that is moist and cool in summer and temperate in winter. In Newfoundland, heathers flower best if exposed to full sun. Heaths, on the other hand, will tolerate light shade. It is best to plant both in a sheltered location. These evergreens are very susceptible to winter burn due to the cold, dry, desiccating winds of January and February. In early spring, strong winds (even if not too cold), together with strong sun can result in scorched foliage. Therefore, northwestern, northeastern, or northern exposures are poor locations for these shrubs. An eastern to western exposure is best.

These plants prefer a well-drained, acidic soil rich in organic matter. Most Newfoundland soils are naturally acidic. Books may suggest you add sulfur to the ground to help increase acidity, but this is not needed, nor recommended in Newfoundland. However, our natural soils are often lacking in organic matter, so the addition of peat, compost, well-aged manure or leaf mould is highly advised. The addition of such material will help create soil that is moisture-retentive yet well drained. If the amended soil still appears too dense, then you may add coarse sand (not beach sand) to the planting area. At the Botanical Garden, we grow our heaths and heathers in the following soil mixture:

- 2 parts peat
- 1 part loam
- 1 part leaf mould
- 1 part coarse sand

Aim to have the planting bed contain at least a 30 cm depth of amended soil.

Planting

While spring is the best time to transplant heaths and heathers, if purchasing pot-grown plants, any time during the growing season will work. However, avoid planting after mid-September as the plants will not have enough time to send out new roots before the ground freezes.

For their size, these small shrubs have a surprisingly wide root system. However, their roots are very small, fragile, and easily damaged. Be sure the root ball is moist before planting and if container grown, do not remove the plant from its container until you are ready to place it in the ground. If root bound, take a sharp knife and cut 2-3 longitudinal cuts about 2 cm into the root ball. These severed roots will then be stimulated to produce additional new roots. Remember to plant the shrubs at the same depth they originally grew; planting too deep may result in root rot.

It is beneficial to place a 3-5 cm layer of leaf mould/peat mix or old compost around the base of a newly-planted or an established heath or heather. This mulch will help maintain soil moisture, keep the ground cool and keep weeds to a minimum.

Care and Maintenance

Keeping in mind that heaths and heathers have shallow, fragile roots, surface cultivation around their roots is not recommended. However, replacing the mulch around their base each year is beneficial.

During most summers, extra watering will not be needed. If conditions remain dry for over a week a thorough watering would be advantageous.

Fertilizers may not be needed if your mulch is from compost or old manure. If the plants do not seem to be thriving, the application of an acid plant fertilizer, (such as Rhododendron fertilizer) at manufacturer's recommended level can be added in spring.

Pruning, if required, is primarily restricted to an annual shearing of the top 10-15 cm of growth. Heaths may never require this shearing but annual shearing of heathers will help keep them compact and dense. If shearing a heath, do so after they finish flowering. Heathers may be trimmed in spring, or after they flower in the fall.

Winter Preparation

Heaths and heathers are very prone to wind-burn in winter. Therefore, unless your planting site is reasonably sheltered, winter protection is advised. Reliable snow-cover is best but not a guarantee on the Avalon Peninsula. If your growing area is somewhat exposed or if snow has a tendency to drift away from the planting area, the plants can be protected by placing evergreen boughs around them.



A mass display of *Erica carnea* cultivars

Recommended Cultivars

The following cultivars have proven to be very successful here at the Botanical Garden:

- Calluna vulgaris* 'Alportii' – single crimson; upright habit
- C. vulgaris* 'County Wicklow' – double pink
- C. vulgaris* 'H. E. Beale' – single silvery-pink
- C. vulgaris* 'J. H. Hamilton' – double pink
- C. vulgaris* 'Else Frye' – double white
- C. vulgaris* 'Kinlochruel' – single white

C. vulgaris 'Mrs. Ronald Grey' – single mauve-pink
C. vulgaris 'Robert Chapman' – single lavender-pink; reddish-yellow foliage
C. vulgaris 'Red Haze' – single lavender; yellow-orange foliage
C. vulgaris 'White Lawn' – single white; prostrate habit
C. vulgaris 'Silver Knight' – single lavender; silvery foliage; upright habit
Erica carnea 'Springwood White' - white
E. carnea 'Springwood Pink' - pink
E. carnea 'December Red' – reddish-pink
E. carnea 'King George' - magenta
E. carnea 'Myretoun Ruby' – ruby-red
E. carnea 'Vivelli' - red
E. carnea 'Anne Sparkes' – pink; gold foliage
E. X darleyensis 'Darley Dale' – pink
E. tetralix 'Con Underwood' – pink
E. tetralix 'Alba Mollis' – white
E. vagans 'Mrs. D. F. Maxwell' – purple-pink
Cassiope mertensiana – white
C. 'Edinburgh' – white
Phyllodoce glanduliflora – cream
P. empetiformis – pink
P. 'Fred Stocker' - pink