

Rezoning For Gardens

New hardiness zone maps will show longer, warmer growing seasons in surprising places. **BY ALEIGH ACERNI**

The data is striking: A comparison of the Arbor Day Foundation's new United States Hardiness Zone Map with USDA's last one—published in 1990—reveals that average temperatures across the country have risen over the past 15 years. And that means you may be able to grow things that may have been considered marginal for your zone in the past.

The new map pairs average annual low temperature data collected by the National Climate Data Center over the last 15 years with U.S. ZIP codes. Significant portions of many states including Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska and Ohio have shifted at least one full hardiness zone, and some smaller areas have warmed two full zones.

"[The update] was really in response to people speaking up and saying the USDA map just doesn't seem to be right anymore," says Woodrow Nelson with the Arbor Day Foundation. And his isn't the only group to recognize that hardiness zones need an update. The USDA itself is also in the process of its own detailed update.

HIGH-TECH VERSION COMING. The new USDA map, which doesn't yet have an official release date, will include 30 years of temperature data and use state-of-the-art Geographic Information Systems and Global Positioning Systems technology to create a digital, searchable map, says Kim Kaplan, a spokesperson for USDA. "We want to take into account elevation and slope of land. One thing this new map will do is work at a scale we've never been able to access before," she adds.

Another goal is for the map to have a zoom feature that will allow a user to click the map in any location and zoom in to a more detailed description on the county, state or regional level. Kaplan also wants to make sure the map is available to all Internet users, whether they have dial-up or broadband Internet access.

NO POLITICS. The climate change issue isn't lost on those developing the new maps.

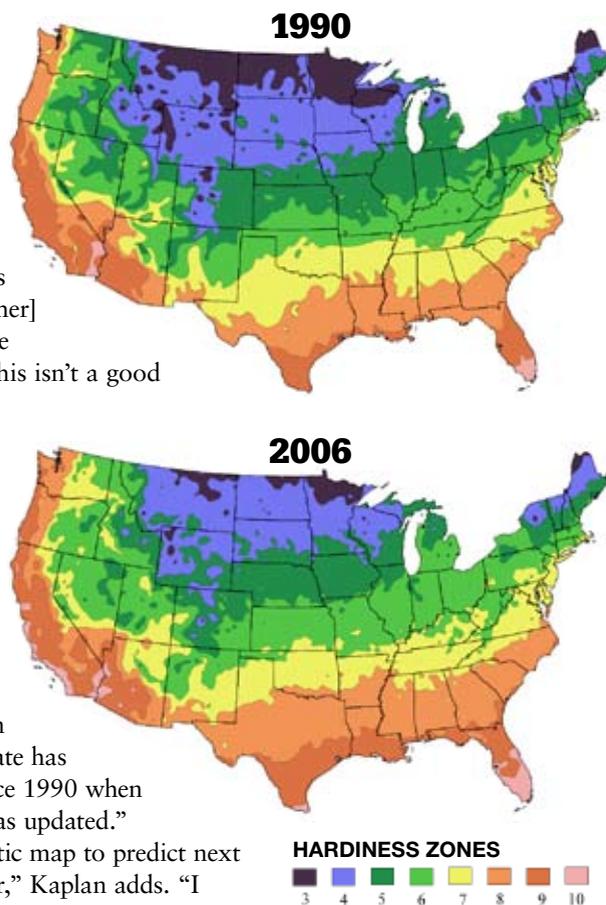
But Kaplan says the map was never intended to be used in an argument for or against global warming. "It's not the purpose of the map," she says. "It's not good evidence. It's not a matter of [whether] there is or isn't climate change; it's just that this isn't a good argument."

That doesn't mean there haven't been temperature changes over the past 15 to 30 years, however, and the new Arbor Day Foundation map is proof. "What the hardiness zone map clearly shows," Nelson says, "is that the climate has warmed, certainly since 1990 when the last USDA map was updated."

"We're asking a static map to predict next year and the year after," Kaplan adds. "I can't get a weatherman to predict tomorrow correctly."

CROP IMPACT. Kaplan thinks horticultural crop growers will feel the most impact. "[The new map] may change what your risk-management agency uses as risk guidelines," she says. "Risk-management agencies use the zones to say that 'if you live in this zone and grow these nursery crops, you need to have crop protection in order to qualify for crop insurance.' It's not likely to change things for a wheat grower or a corn grower."

But the new maps don't have to mean big changes for growers, Kaplan adds. "One of the things I do always tell gardeners: No matter what a zone hardiness map says, whether your zone changes in the new map or not, nothing replaces your knowledge of your piece of land." ●



The new Arbor Day version of the hardiness zone map (bottom) clearly shows warmer zones creeping northward, compared to the USDA map (top) released in January 1990.

SOURCES: ARBOR DAY FOUNDATION AND USDA