

HEATHS & HEATHERS

These evergreens are always gorgeous, and they only need a little help from you

BY STACIE CROOKS

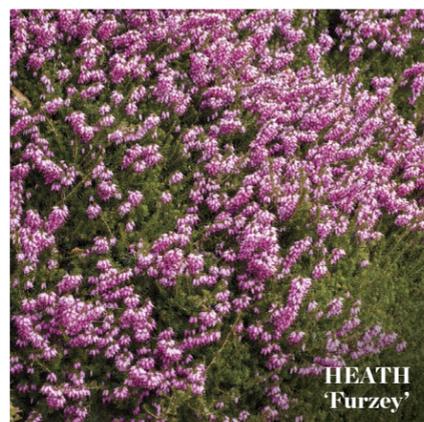
I often hear folks say that they hate heaths (*Erica* spp. and cvs., Zones 5–8) and heathers (*Calluna vulgaris* and cvs., Zones 5–8), their earlier blooming cousins. The most common complaints are the woody, leggy shape they develop (mostly after years of neglect) and how they outgrow the space they've been provided rather quickly. The same people who complain about heaths and heathers admit they have no knowledge of how to care for them. But while these plants do need certain conditions and annual care, they are not divas.

These deer-resistant and salt-resistant evergreens create a beautiful tapestry for every season, with a wide variety of colored foliage and little bell-shape flowers that range from white to deep pinks and purples. They are also an attractive, evergreen ground cover that excels at shading out weeds.

Heaths provide that winter pop of bright color when few other plants are in bloom. I like to use them in ribbons throughout the garden whenever possible, which creates more interest and can make a garden seem a lot larger.

Heathers provide any garden with a blast of glowing colors from late spring into midsummer. They also display stunning winter foliage colors of chartrreuse, coppery oranges, and burgundy.

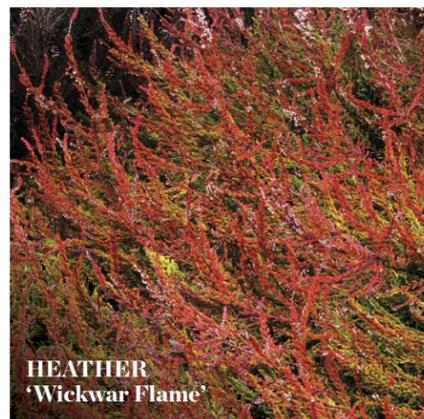
Here are some of my favorite options.



HEATH
'Furzey'

How can I tell the difference?

In general, heathers bloom in summer and heaths bloom in winter. If you are looking at foliage, remember that "heathers have feathers but heath have teeth." The foliage of heathers slightly overlaps, giving it the look of feathers. Heath foliage, however, is linear and needlelike.



HEATHER
'Wickwar Flame'

Why wait for spring to start the show? The winter blooms of heaths last long enough to put on a show with the colorful new growth of heathers.



HEATHS *shine in winter*



'Springwood Pink'

For a winter border, the hands-down favorite is 'Springwood Pink' heath (*Erica carnea* 'Springwood Pink', Zones 4–8), with its brilliant pink blooms that last from January until May. At a mature height of 6 inches and a spread of around 16 inches, 'Springwood Heath' is a perfect choice to line the edges of paths and driveways.

'Furzey' Darley Dale heath (*Erica × darleyensis* 'Furzey', Zones 7–8; photo p. 52) is good for a more mature landscape. It has that old-fashioned, traditional heath look about it. It fills in quickly, sporting lilac flowers with dark purple tips in late winter and on into spring. Growing up to 2 feet high and wide, 'Furzey' is on the larger size if it's left to mature in a backdrop.

'Mary Helen' Darley Dale heath (*Erica × darleyensis* 'Mary Helen', Zones 7–8) has lavender blooms, but it's the bronze-to-gold foliage that makes it a perfect, all-season winner. It won't quite reach a foot tall, but it will spread up to 18 inches. This species of heath is more tolerant of summer humidity and can handle a Zone 6 winter with proper protection (see sidebar, facing page).

If you're looking for eye-catching winter color, then 'Kramer's Rote' Darley Dale heath (*Erica × darleyensis* 'Kramer's Rote', Zones 7–8) is the one for you. It has the darkest, deep purple-red of them all. It grows quickly to 3 feet tall and 4 feet wide. Because the color is so strong, it is best used in groups; otherwise, it will look like polka dots.



'Mary Helen'



'Kramer's Rote'

Photos, except where noted: David Perry, Photos p. 52; Jerry Pavia (top); John Glover/gapphotos.com (bottom). Photos p. 55: Josh McCullough (top); Doreen Wynja (bottom). Illustration: Conor Kovatch.

| CULTURE |

How do you care for them?

Heaths and heathers are easy to grow if you give them the right conditions. They only loathe clay soil and summer humidity (although you can find exceptions), and you can't do much about those. Other than that, you can provide the conditions or find the species or cultivar that suits your spot. The best source for in-depth information is *Gardening with Hardy Heathers* by David Small and Ella May T. Wulff (\$21.99, amazon.com).

◆ **SITING:** While exceptions exist, heaths and heathers prefer full sun (though partial shade may be required for golden-leaved cultivars) and moist but well-drained, acidic soil.

◆ **PLANTING:** Getting your plants established means encouraging their fine roots to go outward into the surrounding soil. If your plants are rootbound, tease out the roots, or even cut into the root ball if needed. Water them well, and keep them moist. The thing that kills most newly planted heaths and heathers is drying out. To avoid that, water the plants twice a week (if conditions require) for the first year. Continue to keep them watered for a few years until they are well established.

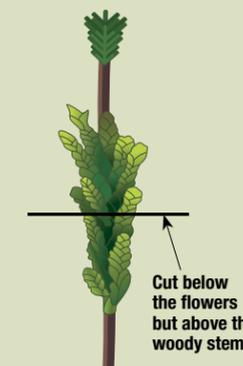
◆ **WINTER PROTECTION:** Winters can be tough on evergreen shrubs like heaths and heathers. Frozen ground can lead to desiccated branches. If your ground freezes but you have steady snow cover, you should be all set. Protection such as evergreen branches or chopped leaves can also work. The biggest danger for heaths and heathers comes not in the depths of winter but in early spring. A late freeze after the plants have broken dormancy can do serious damage. Remove any winter protection gradually, and be ready to replace it if conditions warrant it.

◆ **PRUNING:** Pruning heaths and heathers encourages fuller branching and better blooming. While heaths should be pruned regularly throughout their lives, heathers should be pruned annually. Heathers do not produce foliage on the part of the stem where the flowers were, so an unpruned plant will have bare patches along gangly stems.

The easy part of pruning heather is finding where to cut: anywhere below the spent flowers but not into leafless old wood. Cuts should be made on the entire plant, not just the flowering stems, to encourage a more pleasing habit. Shearing is fine, and it is easier than cutting each stem individually.

The hard part of pruning heather is when to do it; your winter climate and the cultivar are factors in timing. If your climate features temperatures that regularly dip below freezing, leave the flowering stems on the plant for added protection until spring settles in and temperatures are unlikely to drop. Wait too long, however, and you will add the risk of cutting off too much new growth. In mild winter climates, timing is more about the cultivar. If your heather features colorful fall foliage, wait until spring to prune. If it features colorful spring foliage, prune it before it starts to produce new growth.

If you are growing heaths, prune them annually for shape until they are a few years old. After that, pruning every few years will help them keep their shape full and their flower spikes long. Winter-flowering heaths should be pruned immediately after flowering, because they quickly set buds for the following year. Procrastination may result in a year with no flowers.



HEATHERS

are the stars of summer



'Spring Torch'



'Winter Chocolate'



'Silver Knight'



'Blazeaway'



| DESIGN |

Putting heaths and heathers to work

Because these plants offer such steady color, they are extremely versatile design tools. My preferred use is planting them in groupings. I think of using a wide brush stroke, with three, seven, or nine plants at a time in swaths. This creates a carpeting effect when they all knit together.

Heaths and heathers provide year-round interest and coverage that's excellent for suppressing weeds. Be sure to read the tags, and leave enough room for the plants so that when they reach maturity they will not be overcrowded. Plan a way in and out of your garden bed so that you will be able to shear your heather after the blooms begin to fade without stepping on them. You can hide paths between your plants.

For a summer splash of bright color, heathers often steal the show in any garden. For a larger variety with some serious drama, I choose 'Firefly'. In spring, this plant has bright chartreuse and primrose golden foliage that goes perfectly with my Magic Carpet spirea (*Spiraea japonica** 'Walbura', Zones 4–9). Late summer brings beautiful mauve flowers. Expect this heather to grow to around 18 inches tall and wide.

For a much shorter variety in the same color palette, try 'Wickwar Flame', which provides a burst of bright golden yellow and orange foliage with burgundy tips in summer. The tiny purple flowers are a bonus.

My newest favorite—and my garden is full of it now—is 'Winter Chocolate', which has foliage that changes colors from bright orange with burgundy tips in winter into rich gold in summer. It appears to be growing very slowly, however. Eventually it

will reach around 8 inches tall, with a width about twice that.

Another favorite is 'Spring Torch' (photo p. 52), with its deep lilac blooms and rich, emerald green foliage. This color makes it good for carpeting. It grows 12 to 18 inches tall and up to 2 feet wide. It is slow to spread and easy to shear.

'Blazeaway' is a slow-growing heather with a thick matte look. It gets 12 to 18 inches tall and wide and has lovely pink stems with lilac flowers in summer and warm, copper-colored foliage in winter. Plant it in groups for the best show.

For a more elegant and subtle presentation, try 'Silver Knight'. It has frosty, silver-colored foliage and soft, lavender blooms. With an upright habit, this heather is well behaved, reaching 16 inches tall and just a bit wider.

Stacie Crooks is a landscape designer in Seattle.

SOURCES

- **Digging Dog Nursery**
Albion, CA; 707-937-1130; diggingdog.com
- **Highland Heather**
Canby, OR; 503-263-2428; highlandheather.com
- **Heaths and Heathers Nursery**
Shelton, WA; 800-294-3284; heathsandheathers.com
- **Wrightman Alpines Nursery**
St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada; 506-529-9188; wrightmanalpines.com

Photos right, p. 56: milleletphotomedia.com