

# IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU DEFINE IT ... OR IS IT?

prepared by Joe Garofalo\*

Can you change the definition of a word at will? I suspect that Dr. Boudreaux, who taught “Freshman Composition” when I started college, would say that you cannot. [I never knew his first name, you see—when I started college all those many years ago, we were allowed to address a professor only by his title and last name. A professor who had not yet finished his Ph.D. (there were very few, even back then) was addressed as ‘professor’. I also remember that co-eds who wanted to wear pants, especially bluejeans, could do so anytime they wanted, so long they also wore a dress of appropriate length over them. But I digress.]

There are two words of such importance to horticulturists that they should be considered almost sacred. I refer to the terms “tender,” and the opposite, “hardy.” For some reason, many people are not at all clear about the meanings of these words when used to describe plants. It’s really simple; let’s explore a bit.

## **HARDY.**

When you’re talking about plants, “hardy” means “able to withstand cold,” and absolutely nothing else. It does not mean tough. The definition does not tell you how cold or for how long. You

really need to use it with a point of reference, preferably a place. It’s okay to use a “plant hardiness zone” as your point of reference, but a place has a much more precise meaning. If the reader is not familiar with the climatic conditions at the place mentioned, he must seek that information in the records.

## **LILACS AND LIRIOPE.**

Let’s consider an example: “Lilacs are hardy in Chicago and Miami.” That is true, because I cannot imagine very many situations in which a plant that survives the cold in (is “hardy” in) Chicago would be unable to withstand the cold” in Miami. Lilacs do not survive for long in Miami, but the reason has nothing to do with how hardy they are.

Look at it another way: “Liriope is hardy in Miami.” That’s also true. But Liriope is not hardy in Chicago, and that’s why it is good to use a point of reference. “Liriope is hardy” is a statement of little use and essentially no meaning because it lacks a point of reference.

## **INAPPROPRIATE USE.**

Now let’s look at another way the word is often used, but incorrectly: “Liriope

is a tough plant” because it can survive drought, pollution, and other harsh conditions, once it is established. It would be incorrect to say that “Liriope is hardy in Miami,” if I mean that it can survive drought, pollution, and other harsh conditions. Yet we hear the word used in that way all the time.

One last comment on “hardy”: it is incorrect to say that “Liriope is cold-hardy in Miami,” because the statement is redundant. There is, you see, only one kind of hardiness when we’re talking about plants.

## **ROOT-HARDY.**

Actually, there is at least one other “kind” of hardiness, but it doesn’t change anything. We often say that a plant is “root-hardy.” It is, in fact, an appropriate use of the term. It means that the top dies back in Winter because of the cold, but the roots survive to re-sprout in the Spring. Angel Trumpet (*Brugmansia*) is hardy in Miami, but only root-hardy in Tallahassee.

## **HALF-HARDY.**

The British and many of the gardening-book writers from above the Mason-Dixon line like to use the term “half-

hardy” to refer to plants that will survive a drop to 32°F, but won’t survive too many degrees below 32°F.

Good examples of plants that are half-hardy in Florida are snapdragon, pansy, centaurea, and calendula (in descending order of hardiness). These are treated as Winter annuals in North Florida, where they are half-hardy. They come through a typical Winter in North Florida with no damage from cold, blooming in a reserved way during every warm spell that lasts a week or longer. When Spring finally arrives, they bloom with reckless abandon, mainly because they are well established.

These species, being only half-hardy, may be damaged or even killed during an unusually severe coldsnap.

## **FROST.**

You will sometimes run into wording similar to this: “The pansy can take several more degrees of frost than can the calendula.” There is, in fact, no such thing as a “degree of frost.” You either have frost, or you don’t; and frost can form well above the freezing point of water. We’re better off not using such ambiguous wording. It’s a lot clearer to say exactly what we mean:

“Calendulas usually can survive a drop to 29° or 30°F, often called a light freeze, but pansies usually can survive a drop to 25°F, a hard freeze.

**TENDER.**

Now, let’s consider “tender.” It means “not able to withstand cold.” As with hardy, we need a point of reference. “Liriope is tender in Chicago, but hardy in Miami.” That’s a good statement. On the other hand, if you mean that a plant is “delicate,” you should use the word delicate or some other term that won’t lead to confusion.

It’s likely that a lot of people will grant that African violets are “delicate,” or “finicky,” or “particular,” about being in the shade, being watered with water at ambient temperature, and not being bounced around too much. They also happen to be “tender” in Jacksonville, but that has nothing to do with how tough or how delicate they are; they’re tender in Jacksonville because they cannot withstand the cold in Jacksonville.

**PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER.**

This brings us to the last point I want to discuss about “tender” and “hardy”—if no point of reference is given, the terms can be assumed to refer to 32°F. That’s usually a safe assumption, but the person using these two terms

without a point of reference is, in fact, “not communicating his thoughts clearly,” as Dr. Boudreaux would say. (Note that tropical plants suffer cold-damage well above 32°F.)

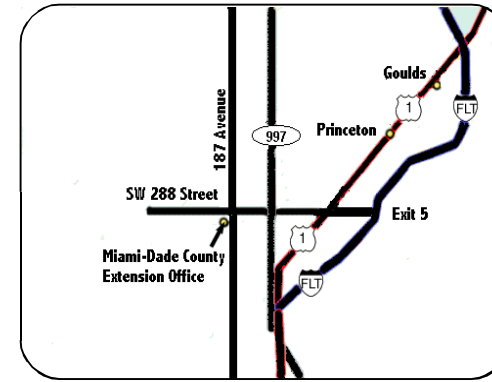
So, the next time you’re browsing that catalog from the Demblumengoot mail-order bulb company (based in Holland, with a branch in Michigan), and read that “the tulip ‘North to Alaska’ is hardy in zones 1 through 11,” you can believe it. A plant that is hardy on the North Slope (zone 1) is not likely to die because of the cold in Key West (zone 11). It will not survive for long in Key West, but not because it is tender there.

Just as lilacs do not survive for long in Miami Beach, though they certainly are hardy there, also the ‘North to Alaska’ tulip is not likely to grow well in Miami Beach, even if it is hardy at both South Beach and the beaches at Point Barrow.

Now that reminds me of ... Well, maybe next time.

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***In Writing***

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