



Heaths (several species of *Erica*) and Heathers (*Calluna vulgaris*)

Alex X. Niemiera, Professor, School of Plant and Environmental Sciences, Virginia Tech

Heaths and heathers are ground covers or low shrubs that are in the heath family (Ericaceae). The great variation in flower and foliage colors makes them very valuable garden species. Heaths and heathers can provide year round beauty to a garden. Heaths and heathers will be presented individually since they vary considerably in flowering time and size.

Spring heath (also called mountain, winter or snow heath)

Erica carnea

Summary:

Foliage: Needle-like; about one-third of an inch long; evergreen; dark green but this varies with cultivar

Height: 6 to 12 inches

Spread: To 2 feet wide

Shape: Low spreading ground cover

Main features: Slow-growing evergreen ground cover with very showy flowers in winter and spring. Flower color (ranging from pink to white to red) and time of flowering depending on the cultivar; there are over 100 registered cultivars. Foliage color can be just as attractive as flowers since, depending on cultivar, colors vary from dark green to lime green to yellow to bronze.

Plant Needs:

Zone: 5 to 7

Light: Full sun to part shade (full sun maximizes flowering)

Moisture: Average to moist

Soil type: Absolute requirement for a well-drained soil with ample organic matter content. Will languish in a clay soil. Use fertilizer sparingly; over-fertilization will kill plants.

pH range: Acid but will tolerate alkaline conditions

Functions:

Ground cover

Care:

Heaths are relatively low-maintenance plants. They may occasionally need pruning which should be done in the spring (after flowering). A light trimming (remove spent flowers and branch tips) is suggested. A hard pruning (resulting in leafless branches) is not recommended.

Additional Information:

This ground cover/small shrub species has evergreen foliage yet the foliage mimics a conifer since it has small (about 0.2 to 0.3 inches long) needle-like leaves.

For additional information and pictures of some of the heath clones, visit the Heather Society's website: <http://www.heathersociety.org.uk/>; , Within this website, click on the *Handy Guide to Heathers* link for specific species and cultivar information. There are two booklets with detailed information on heaths (also called heathers) within the Society's website:

<http://www.heathersociety.org.uk/everyone.pdf> and
<http://www.heathersociety.org.uk/recommended.pdf>

Other *Erica* Species:

There are over 700 species of *Erica* in the world, however, most of these species are native to South Africa . Most *Erica* in the trade are *E. carnea* but there are a few other garden worthy species and hybrids (with hardiness zones noted in parentheses), such as *Erica ciliaris* (Dorset heath; zone 7); *E. cinerea* (twisted heath; zone 5 to 7); *E. xdarleyensis* (a hybrid; zone 6 to7); *E. erigena* (Irish heath; zone 7); *E. xgriffithsii* (a hybrid; zone 6); *E. mackaiana* (Mackay's heath; zone 7); *E. manipuliflora* (zone 8); *E. terminalis* (zone 5); *E. tetraliz* (cross-leaved heath; zone 4 to 5); and *E. vagans* (Cornish heath; zone 5 to 7).

Heather (also called Scotch heather or ling) *Calluna vulgaris*

Summary:

Foliage: Scale-like to one-eighth inch long; evergreen; green but this varies with cultivar and season)

Height: 6 to 30 inches

Spread: To 2 or more feet wide

Shape: Low spreading ground cover

Main features: Heathers are slow-growing evergreen ground covers with very showy flowers in late summer and autumn. Flower color (ranging from white to pink to mauve to red) and time of flowering depend on the cultivar; there are over 700 registered cultivars. Foliage color can be just as attractive as flowers since, depending on cultivar and season, colors vary from green to yellow to orange, to red to silver.

Plant Needs

Zone: 4 to 6 (marginally heat tolerant in zone 7)

Light: Full sun to part shade (full sun maximizes flowering)

Moisture: Average to moist. Irrigate during dry spells

Soil type: Absolute requirement for a well-drained soil with ample organic matter content. Will languish in a clay soil. Use fertilizer sparingly; over-fertilization will kill plants.

pH range: Acid soil

Functions

Ground cover



Care:

Heathers are relatively low-maintenance plants. They may occasionally need pruning which should be done in the after flowering. A light trimming (remove spent flowers and branch tips) is suggested. A hard pruning (resulting in leafless branches) is not recommended.

Additional Information:

This ground cover/small shrub species has evergreen foliage yet the foliage mimics a conifer since it has small (about 0.1 inch long) scale-like leaves.

For additional information and pictures of some of the heather clones, visit the Heather Society's website: <http://www.heathersociety.org.uk/>; Within this website, click on the *Handy Guide to Heathers* link for specific cultivar information. There are two booklets with detailed information on heathers within the Society's website: <http://www.heathersociety.org.uk/everyone.pdf> and <http://www.heathersociety.org.uk/recommended.pdf>

