



Heath and Heather

Erica carnea and *Calluna vulgaris*



Calluna vulgaris

Heath and heather are non-native low-growing evergreen shrubs that hold not only their leaves but also their flowers all winter. Known as spring or winter heath due to its bloom time, *Erica carnea* has the most delicate, bell-shaped red to pink flowers and whorled to opposite, needle-like, bright green leaves that are barely ½" long. The leaf margins are turned under and they have very short petioles.

The family Ericaceae also includes the true heathers that were once included in the genus *Erica* but are now in the genus now called *Calluna*. *Calluna* heathers are called summer or autumn heathers and can be identified by their smaller, 1/10th of an inch, medium green, scale-like leaves which are in opposite pairs and the rosy to purplish-pink flowers which emerge in late summer. The flowers are in clusters along 2-3" racemes. It is the heather *Calluna vulgaris* that evokes images of wide expanses of Scottish highland moors that appear to be covered in a pink mist. Exposure in winter makes foliage develop a bronze, yellow, reddish or silvery cast depending on the cultivar. Both species bear small fruit capsules that are not ornamental.

Location

Plant in full sun or slight shade in the early spring or fall do not allow these shallow rooted new plantings to dry out before they can establish themselves. Both species are hardy to zone 5. Heath will slowly grow to a height of 12" and a width of 24". Heather will reach up to 36" high and wide, forming thick mats. The compact, or dwarf, size of most heath helps to limit the amount of air circulation through the plant and it creates its own microclimate whereby the plant is not as vulnerable to the cold as a taller, more openly branched plant. Its low growth habit does expose it to the possibility of frost when very cold air settles near the ground but it's likely that in Connecticut a cover of snow

may insulate it. Heath and heather do well as groundcovers, in rock gardens and as filler plants.



Erica carnea

Soil and Water Requirements

Soil for these plants should be low in fertility but high in organic matter and well-drained. Some gardeners amend the soil with peat moss, which can hold more than 20 times its dry weight in water in its cells, to help retain moisture. If you do add peat moss your heath plantings will receive an added benefit as the moss takes up calcium and magnesium from the surrounding soil and releases hydrogen. This action, called cation exchange, acidifies the soil. Heather prefers acidic soil which means that they are well suited to Connecticut. Plant them in area that will not be affected when you lime your lawn.

Fertilization

Give them a dose of Holly-tone once a year when fertilizing other acid-loving plants such as rhododendron, azalea, or holly making sure that it doesn't adhere to the foliage and reaches the drip line of the plant. As with any fertilizer it should be watered in. Do not use lawn fertilizers near heath and heather which may kill the plant by over-fertilizing with nitrogen.

Propagation and Pruning

Heath and heather are propagated by seed and cuttings. Spring is a good time to do any pruning of heath before the plant sets its flower buds or has new growth. Prune just to control any unwanted spreading and avoid pruning in the late fall as open cuts can collect water that will expand during a freeze and cause the stems to split. True heather (*Calluna sp.*) should be pruned annually in the spring as the flower buds do not set on old wood and the plants will become leggy and unattractive. Prune *C. vulgaris* at the base of old flowers.

Diseases and Insects

Other than needing occasional pruning heath and heather are very low-maintenance plants with few issues. Deer or rabbits will feed on it as will the larvae of the Lepidopteran order which includes butterflies and moths or moths in the Coleophora genus.

Varieties

Heath

- 'King George' - 12" tall; flowers crimson.
- 'Springwood Pink' - light pink flower; 8" tall; common in the trade.
- 'Springwood White' - 8" tall; flowers white; common in the trade.
- 'Vivellii' - 8" tall; flowers red.
- 'Winter Beauty' - 5" tall; pink flowers.

Heather

- 'Alba' - Flowers white
- 'Alba Erecta' - Branching upright, flowers white
- 'Alportii' - Flowers crimson, foliage gray

'Aurea' - 18" tall; flowers pink; Aug. - Oct; foliage yellow
'County Wicklow' - 18" tall; flowers pink, double; Aug. - Oct.
'Cuprea' - 12" tall; flowers purple; Aug. - Oct; foliage yellow
'Else Frye' - Flowers double, white; foliage bright green
'Foxii Nana' - 4" tall; flowers purple; Aug. - Oct
'H.E. Beale' - 24" tall; flowers silvery-pink; Aug. - Oct; considered to be one of the best heathers
'J.H. Hamilton' - 9" tall; flowers pink, double; Aug. - Oct; best of the pinks
'Juno' - 8-12" tall; flowers lavender
'Mairs Variety' - 24" tall; flowers white; July - Sept
'Mrs. Pat' - 8" tall; flowers light purple; July - Sept; foliage pink in spring
'Mrs. Ronald Gray' - 4" tall; flowers reddish; July - Sept; very low growing
'Nana Compacta' - 6" tall; flowers pink; July - Sept
'Plena Multiplex' - 18" tall; flowers pink, double; Aug. - Oct.
'Pygmaea' - Plant dwarf and mat-forming; flowers purple
'Ronald Gray' - Plant prostrate; flowers lavender
'Searlei Aurea' - 12" tall; flowers white; Aug. - Oct; foliage yellow
'Silver Knight' - To 15" tall; lavender flowers in late summer, gray foliage all year; compact; popular
'Sister Anne' - 6" tall; flowers pink; Aug - Sept
'Tib' - Plant forms an open mound; flowers dark purple, double; popular form
'Tomentosa' - 10" tall; flowers lavender; July - Sept
'Valorian' - Plant mat-forming; flowers deep-lavender

Despite good cultural practices, pests and diseases at times may appear. Chemical control should be used only after all other methods have failed.

For pesticide information or other questions please call toll free: 877-486-6271.

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