

# Heaths & Heathers



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PIXABAY.COM

Heaths bloom in winter or spring. Whereas heather flowers are generally bell-shaped, heath flowers are urn-shaped.

**Q**uestion: I've noticed a pretty plant called heather for sale at the local nursery. What is the difference between heath and heather, and are they good plants for my garden?

**A**nsWER: Heaths and heathers are non-native, low-growing perennial evergreen shrubs that are ideal for gardens and as groundcovers.

Heather will reach about 8-20 inches in height, while heath generally reaches about 12 inches. Both shrubs maintain a low, mound-like appearance and can be used effectively in rock gardens, border plantings or as companion plants.

The family Ericaceae (the heath family) includes true heathers that were once a part of the genus *Erica* but have been reclassified to the genus *Calluna*. The Ericaceae family contains shrubs and trees with rounded bell-shaped, tubular or irregular flowers and fruits that are either capsules or berries. All share a preference for acid soil with ample water and excellent aeration. Many fine garden plants in the Ericaceae family include azalea and rhododendron, blueberry, heath (*Erica*) and heather (*Calluna*).

Heather doesn't bloom during the winter. *Calluna* heathers are called summer or



**Debby Finley**  
Master Gardener

autumn heathers and include Scotch Heather, the heather we visualize growing on the Scottish highland moors. It has crowded, tiny, scalelike, dark green leaves that lie flat on the stem, making them appear somewhat like a conifer from a distance.

Heaths, on the other hand, have actual needles like a conifer.

Heathers have one-sided spikes of bell-shaped, rosy pink flowers that bloom from late July to September. Garden varieties include dwarf ground cover and rock garden plants ranging from 2-4 inches to 2-3 feet tall. Flower colors include white, pink, lavender and purple.

Heathers thrive in sandy, peaty, fast-draining soil and are well adapted to the Northwest. To encourage good growth and bloom, give the heath or heather a light feeding with acid plant food once in February or March and a second time in June along with frequent watering.



Heather flowers, which range from white, pink, lavender and purple, bloom from late July to September.

Heaths bloom in winter or spring. The flower structure between heaths and heathers is very similar, but whereas heather flowers are generally bell-shaped, heath flowers are urn-shaped. Depending on the variety, the urn-shape can sometimes look like an elongated tubular form.

*Erica carnea* offers delicate, urn-shaped pink to red flowers that bloom from January through March. Heath has

needle-like, bright green leaves that are barely 1/2" long. *Erica* has the finest texture of all the heathers, and generally feels soft and fluffy.

To prevent heaths and heathers from becoming leggy and woody, prune back about 30% after flowers have faded to keep the foliage looking full and lush. Heathers are the more cold-hardy of the two plants but both do well in Oregon. A minimum of six hours

of sun per day is needed for the plants to thrive.

Generally immune to pests and disease, drought tolerant and low maintenance, heaths and heathers are a most welcome and cheerful addition to any garden.

*Do you have a gardening question? Email the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu).*