
What Might Climate Change Mean for Our Zone?

Many of us have probably noticed that winters and summers in Prince George just aren't what they used to be. As a cross-country skier, I can certainly say that winter—and skiing—has changed since I moved here in 1987. Some people believe our climate may eventually resemble the Okanagan, while others have suggested that our region could become more like a rainforest.

Before going further, it helps to review a few key terms. Weather refers to the condition of the atmosphere at a particular time and place—for example, the weather in Prince George today. Climate, on the other hand, describes the pattern of weather in a place over many years. Global warming refers to the increase in the Earth's average surface temperature, although the impacts go beyond warming alone, often resulting in more erratic and severe weather. Climate change describes these long-term shifts in temperature and weather patterns. While some changes occur naturally due to factors such as solar activity or volcanic eruptions, human activity is also influencing the climate.

So what do these changing patterns mean for gardeners, particularly when it comes to plant hardiness zones?

Most gardeners rely on the Canadian Plant Hardiness Zone map to help determine what plants will survive in their area. Historically, Prince George has been considered Zone 3, with colder pockets closer to Zone 2 and some slightly milder areas—such as South Fort George—approaching Zone 4.

A recent article by Jennifer Cole in the Winter 2025–2026 issue of *Gardener for Canadian Climates* highlighted updates released by Natural Resources Canada. The new hardiness maps show many regions across Canada shifting upward by half a zone or even a full zone. In some areas, viticulture is expanding northward and northern regions may now be able to grow crops such as Saskatoon berries. These changes could even improve food security in certain parts of the country.

Hardiness zones are determined using several climate variables, including the coldest winter temperatures, length of the growing season, rainfall, summer heat, freeze–thaw patterns, snow depth, and wind. Anyone who has lived in Prince George for many years has likely noticed changes in several of these factors.

However, warmer conditions are not entirely good news. Milder winters may allow more pests and plant diseases to survive and spread. Gardeners must also prepare for climate extremes. In recent years, some local gardeners lost shrubs and trees when early freezes arrived before a protective snow cover, followed by repeated freeze–thaw cycles.

Good gardening practices are becoming even more important. Mulching, composting, and maintaining healthy soil can help protect plants, while watering thoroughly in the fall improves winter survival. It is also wise to consider how to make both gardens and homes more fire-smart.

So, has our climate zone changed—and can we start planting banana trees? For more information, visit Natural Resources Canada's Plant Hardiness website, which provides updated maps and valuable tools for gardeners.

planthardiness.gc.ca

Patricia Covington
Master Gardener – Class of 2017
