

Cracking the Garden Catalog Codes

More and more catalogs arrive daily. The bright, enhanced colors of every listed plant overwhelms me. To purchase and grow every seed, bulb, and plant that I desire, I would need a larger homestead and an army of gardeners. My wife would have to get a high-paying job. It is hard to create a plant and seed budget and stick to it.

Before ordering from a catalog, consider buying locally first. Our local businesses deserve our support. Many of the varieties featured in catalogs are often available in our nursery centers and big box stores, and sometimes at discounted prices. In addition, you save by not having to pay shipping and handling. If money is really tight, consider getting free seeds from a local seed library (Google “Seed Libraries in Minnesota”).



Don't overlook coupons, special offers, discontinued varieties, or other savings printed in the catalog. Sometimes there is free shipping if the order exceeds a certain amount. The vendor may include free seed packages (vendor's choice) in your order. Check shipping rates – you might save money with a larger order. You might be able to save money on shipping by bundling your order along with that of a neighbor.

There are many good seed and nursery companies and some not so good ones. I do not like to order from an unknown source, unless I get a good recommendation from a fellow gardener. Sometimes I check **Dave's Garden Watchdog Guide to Gardening by Mail, Mail Order Gardening, and Catalogs**, (<https://davesgarden.com/products/gwd/#b>). From their own description: “The Garden Watchdog is a free directory of 8,141 mail order gardening companies. Here gardeners share their opinions on which companies really deliver on quality, price and service.” It does a good job of listing a very large number of garden vendors, but not all. It is fun to read the comments. Any gardener can share an opinion of a business on this website.

Guarantees: A good company will have some sort of no-risk guarantee, if you are not fully satisfied. Stay away from companies that offer nothing.

Order early. The most popular seed and plant varieties often sell out quickly. Demand for seeds is increasing as more and more Americans are starting food gardens due to rising food prices. If you order early, you will get your order in a reasonable time; later, during the rush season (when the whole world sends in seed orders on the first warm spring day), your order may be delayed because the seed vendors are so busy. If you order online rather than mailing in your order, the company often lists if the item is still in stock or not.

I like to check the index of a catalog first, to see what the catalog contains. The index might be at the front, rear, or even the middle of the catalog – there is no universal placement. Many companies use symbols or abbreviations; find the key to the symbols/abbreviations so you can understand the product descriptions.

Scientific Names. If possible, check the scientific name when ordering, so you know exactly what you are purchasing. For example, there are many different species that are called sunflowers, but there is only one *Helianthus maximiliani*, Maximillian's sunflower.

Choose the winners. Organizations like the All-American Selections organization, Fleuroselect, Minnesota Master Gardeners Seed Trials (<https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/master-gardener-seed-trials>), and the West Central Research Center in Morris (<https://wcroc.cfans.umn.edu/research/horticulture/flower-research-results>) provide information about the best performing plants.

Hardiness zones: The Department of Agriculture divides the nation into regions (zones), based on the lowest expected winter temperatures within an area. With climate warming, the metropolitan Twin Cities recently moved up into Zone 5 (lows of -20 to -10 degrees F.) from the previous Zone 4 (lows of -30 to -20 degrees). Plants that are rated at Zone 5 should survive here, but I would still provide winter protection just to be safe.

The Growing Season for the Twin Cities area is defined as the number of days between the last spring frost (around April 30) and the first fall frost (around October 5) – about 158 days of warm growing weather. Note that **cool season vegetables** like peas, the cabbage family, lettuce, spinach, and beets can be sown before the last spring frost and then again into the cooler weather of fall. In fact, cool season vegetables suffer in hot weather. **Warm season plants** (tomatoes, peppers, squash, marigolds) need to be planted after the ground warms and the danger of spring frost is passed. For tomatoes, a week of nights above 55 degrees F. should warm the soil to an ideal state for the plants.

Days to Maturity (DTM) is the number of days from planting seed until your first harvest. However, with crops like tomatoes and peppers, the plants must be started indoors if we northern gardeners expect a crop. With vegetables that are set out as transplants, DTM is measured from the time that the transplant is put into the soil until the first harvest. Because we hope to have plenty of tomatoes producing for a good long time, we avoid tomato varieties with Days to Maturity that are over 80-85 days. Note that different vendors will list different days to maturity for a given variety, so days to maturity will only give you a rough idea of when you can expect your first harvest.

Open pollinated refers to a variety that is not a hybrid and which is pollinated by insects, the wind, or is self-pollinating. Seeds from an open pollinated variety may be saved and will reproduce plants like the parents. If the open-pollinated variety has been around for over 50 years, people may call it an **Heirloom variety**.

Hybrids, on the other hand, are the children of two different varieties and are produced by hand pollination. The Hybrid seeds produce highly uniform plants, but if you save and grow seeds from your hybrid plants, the genetic marbles sort out and you get a wide variety of differing plants. Some hybrids are sterile.

Non-GMO and the Safe Seed Pledge: There is only one Genetically Modified Vegetable on the market, 'The Purple Tomato' from England. Still, vendors often state that they do not sell Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) seeds and they never will by subscribing to a Safe Seed Pledge.

What are you getting? A good company will state the number of seeds in the package, whether the plant is bare-rooted or potted, the size of the pot, or height/size of the shrub or tree. Remember that items such as strawberries and asparagus are often sent bare-rooted. They often look dry and ugly but will recover nicely when planted and watered.

New does not necessarily mean a brand-new variety. It most often means the vendor is now carrying a variety, new to his catalog, that others may have sold for years.

Blue does not necessarily mean blue. Blue is a rare and highly desired color in the flower world. Often blue is used as a description for something that is close, but not quite true blue.

A good catalog provides a good deal of information about plant hardiness, height and width, bloom time, days to maturity, disease resistance, hybrid or heirloom/open-pollinated, precautions, and growing information. You can become an expert by reading every catalog cover to cover. Don't forget that the vendor's website may

contain additional information in the form of blogs or short videos. The information is often very useful and fun to look at but may not be quite as detailed as University Extension sites.

I hope this helps with your catalog shopping.

Happy Gardening, Joe Baltrukonis