

KPOV – *The Point*
Gardening: Get Good At It
“Getting the Most from Seed Catalogs – Part 1”
February 27, 2018

On one of those particularly cold and blustery wintry days, I like to gather up all the seed catalogs that have arrived in my mailbox and settle down for a good read. Even if you don't plan to buy from them but buy locally this spring, you can learn much from catalogs if you understand a few key terms and all that may be packed into the descriptions.

Of course it helps to have a pen and paper, or perhaps a laptop, handy to note all your choices and plans. If you have a laptop computer or other internet access handy, you might want to check out the seed catalogs online too. Many offer web-only specials.

Ordering from seed catalogs is both convenient, and a good way to get a wider selection than usually is available locally, especially if you are looking for quite new or unusual varieties. Yet most catalogs offer a lot more than just an order list for seeds and plants. I like to compare several catalogs, as they usually emphasize different points.

The first item that should catch your eye in catalogs, other than photos, is the name of the flower or vegetable. The words “New” or “Improved” aren't just selling points, they often mean the variety has been changed in some trait, perhaps substantially.

Icons are used to highlight key traits, such as a sun for heat tolerance, a snowflake for cold tolerance, or a pot meaning good in containers. Look for the key to these icons, which vary among catalogs, at the beginning or often on the bottom of each page. One icon used for most is the red, white and blue All-America Selections shield, indicating this variety won this award, being judged by professionals nationwide as superior.

Letters you may see by some crops are F1 and OP. These refer, respectively, to F1 hybrids (first generation, compared to F2 which is second generation) and Open Pollinated. The former are crosses between two parents, to produce a variety with hybrid traits and vigor. If you collect seeds of these F1 hybrids, they won't give you the same variety. Open pollinated plants, on the other hand, will come “true” from their seeds when sown.

Other code letters you will see with some plants, in particular some vegetables such as vine crops and tomatoes, are ones referring to disease resistance. Choose these varieties, and you may have fewer diseases in the garden to deal with. In one catalog I saw over 50 listed—not all of course for one crop. Some of the main ones to watch for on tomatoes for instance are TMV (tobacco mosaic virus), TSWV (tomato spotted wilt virus), V (verticillium wilt), and F (fusarium wilt). If there has been late blight in your area in recent years, wiping out tomatoes, look for the few with resistance to this (LB).

The other key point in seed catalog descriptions is days to maturity. This could mean from sowing, or in the case of slow crops the days from setting out plants. Check the catalog to make sure what is meant. This is particularly important in northern areas with short growing seasons (days between frosts), in order to get flowers or in the case of vegetables their fruits. Even with this, if a summer is particularly cool and the crop likes warmth, it may mature more slowly.

Descriptions are useful for specifics such as fruit or flower color, particular flavors of vegetables, heights and spreads. Even these may vary greatly among catalogs, so compare several, and they may vary from your own garden. Beware of general and glowing adjectives such as “good”, “popular”, or “large”, as these are relative and may have little meaning in your own garden. Just as the photos are often “enhanced” (don’t get disappointed if your flowers and vegetables don’t look as luscious), so are many descriptions.

To avoid ending up with too many seeds, roughly map out your garden to scale, then “fit in” the varieties you want grow. A good catalog will give the approximate seeds per packet, and spacing when planting seedlings or sowing seeds. So, for instance, for sweet corn you may see 150 seeds per packet. If the recommendation is to plant 3 seeds per foot, this packet would sow 50 feet of row.

You should also see growing tips for each crop, as in the case of corn it’s best to plant several rows close together for best pollination. So rather than one long row, five 10-foot rows, three feet apart would be better. So the simple math means you need an area 10 by 3 feet, or 30 square feet just for this packet of corn seeds.

The good news is, if you end up with too many seeds, most store well for a year or more in a jar in the refrigerator. Or, order with a friend and share the seeds.

If you don’t have any catalogs, and aren’t on their mail lists already, search online for some. You can invariably order up a printed copy to be mailed from their websites, as well as see the range of plants they offer and any specialties. Especially in the case of vegetables, if you like a crop in particular, such as lettuce or tomatoes or peppers, you may be surprised how many selections you can find. Just remember, don’t get carried away with more than you and your garden space can handle—something I continually seem to neglect!

Resources:

pss.uvm.edu/ppp/articles/armchair.html - Dr. Leonard Perry, Extension Professor

www.all-americanselections.org All American Selection

www.superseeds.com Pinetree in New Gloucester, Massachusetts

www.johnnyseed.com Johnny’s Seeds in Albion, Maine

www.catalogs.com/Gardening - 25 free catalogs in one place