

Not Seed Savvy? Dig Into Garden Catalogs

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Published in Estes Park News, January 7, 2022, p. 10.

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This article was first published January 25, 2019, brought back at this perfect time to begin planning your 2022 garden.

One of the joys of January is receiving colorful, tantalizing seed catalogs. For gardeners, it's like getting holiday gifts all over again.

Each catalog has its own personality. There's Johnny's Selected Seeds, with its no-nonsense, encyclopedic descriptions. Then there's Broomfield-based Botanical Interests, with its artful plant illustrations and alluring varieties. And of course, there's every personality in between.

All this temptation is enough to make otherwise-sane gardeners go wile, scribbling out order forms willy-nilly.

But wait – think about how you want to allocate your garden space among flowers, fruits, vegetables and herbs. Do you really have room for a full-blown zucchini or should you opt for a newer, more compact variety?

Besides mature size, there are other factors to consider.

- **When to sow.** Although this information is always included on seed packets, it can be a little harder to find in catalogs. But it's often there. Botanical Interests makes it easy by including a two-page indoor and outdoor sowing guide. Carrot seeds, according to the guide, should be sown outdoors two to four weeks before your last average frost date. In Estes, the last spring freeze typically occurs in early- to mid-June, which means you would plant the carrot seeds outdoors around mid-May.
- **Days to harvest or bloom.** Given that Estes Park's growing seasons lasts roughly 90 to 100 days, it's critical to check the number of days to maturity from direct-sown seed or from transplants started indoors. Romaine lettuce, for example, matures in about 65 days, which makes it a viable candidate for your climate.
- **Disease resistance.** Some catalogs may simply include "DR" in the description to indicate disease resistance for a particular variety. Other catalogs may offer more detail, providing specific resistance codes, such as "PM" for powdery mildew or "TMV" for tomato mosaic virus.
- **Open pollinated or hybrid.** If you want to save seeds from your plants to sow next year, buy open pollinated varieties, which will come true from seed. In other words, your baby plants will turn out like the parent plants. If, on the other hand, seed saving isn't important to you, consider hybrids, which are crosses between pure-bred parents. Although their seeds won't come true the second year, hybrids may offer certain desirable characteristics, such as early

maturity, better disease resistance or increased yields. You can identify a hybrid in the product description or by its name, which will include F1 or an X.

- Organic or conventional. Organic seeds are harvested from organically grown plants. Buying them helps support organic farming. But organic seeds aren't available for all varieties. In a seed catalog, there will be a USDA Organic seal next to the organic seed variety. Conventional seeds are harvested from plants treated with chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Can you buy conventional seed and grow it organically? Yes.
- Heirlooms or not. All heirloom varieties are open pollinated, but not all open pollinated varieties are heirlooms. Some companies may label a variety an heirloom because it's, say, 50 years old. Other companies, such as Seed Savers Exchange, may designate a variety an heirloom after verifying and documenting its background from generation to generation. One popular heirloom is the Black Krim tomato.
- Determinate or indeterminate. You'll see these terms applied to tomatoes. Determinate means the tomato will be compact, growing perhaps three or four feet high. Indeterminate means the tomato may produce vines as long as six to 12 feet.

As you may notice, seed catalogs aren't just collections of pretty pictures. They're a resource for growing your gardening knowledge.

For more information on gardening, visit the CSU Extension website at extension.colostate.edu.

Deb Courtner contributed this article through Dr. Alison O'Connor, CSU Horticulture Agent in Larimer County. Estes Valley Community Garden Board thanks them for providing this information.