A Greener View: Gardening catalogs and certain garden centers offer more plant varieties

by Jeff_Rugg

January is National Mail Order Gardening Month. Have you received your garden catalogs in the mail yet? If you haven't gotten enough gardening catalogs or need more specific ones on a certain type of plant, then go to www.mailordergardening.com for a complete list of companies that offer catalogs. It is time to start the new year by buying new plants for the garden that will use less water, be more resistant to disease and create a nicer landscape.

Once again, I must remind gardeners that just because a catalog lists a plant as new, does not mean it is recent; it may be a new addition to their catalog this year. Several new and old plants listed in catalogs will not be available in your local garden centers or big box stores. Big box stores stock the few species that locally sold well in the past. And many local garden centers are not much better.

If people don't buy the new varieties, it is not worth the space and labor to take care of them. If you want new exciting colors and often plants that are easier to care for, you need to ask your local garden center for them. Or search out the specialty garden center in your region that will take the time to find the plants you want.

Some specialty garden centers are also growers with their own catalogs. They often have exclusive rights to new plants for several years after a plant is discovered, so the quantity available can be increased. Eventually enough are sold to other growers, causing the plant to become widely available. At the same time, people need to be asking for the plants or the growers won't stock them. The whole new plant situation is a "Catch 22" problem. If people don't buy new plants, then stores won't stock them; however, if they are not in stock, people can't buy them.

If you are a new gardener, the best place to buy plants is your local garden center. Some garden centers are better than others in terms of plant care, pricing and knowledgeable people. Check them all out until you find the best fit for you.

If you want to buy plants or seeds through a catalog, it helps to understand some of the definitions. The term "annuals" is used for plants that sprout, bloom, produce seeds and then die all within one year. Perennials will live for several years or even many decades. Tender perennials need extra protection from winter weather.

You need to know your hardiness zone. Originally, hardiness zones were only used to describe how cold the winter's lowest temperatures reached. Now there are also hardiness zones depicting the effects of the summer's heat. Since there is more than one cold hardiness zone map, most catalogs will show an example of the one they are using. You will need to keep track of the zone each catalog is using.

Hybrid vegetables are often more tolerant of insect or disease problems, while the terms "open pollinated," heirloom or antique are used for older varieties that may not look very pretty but often taste better.

Tomatoes that are listed as determinate will stop growing taller at the height listed, while indeterminate tomatoes will continue growing all over the place.

Don't be fooled by plants that are listed as winners of meaningless prizes. Look to see who awarded the prize. If the plant was grown in trial gardens and won an award, it is a worthy plant. Look for All-America Selection winners, All-American Daylily Sections and All-America Rose Selections.

Some catalog companies will supply a substitute if the plant or seed you ordered is out of stock. If you would prefer your money back, make sure you note on the order form that you don't want substitutes.

As with any financial transaction that occurs through the mail, you should keep photocopies of your order. Use a credit card, check or money order to safely pay for your order. Carefully read the directions in order to place your order correctly. This will help eliminate delays caused by the company needing to reach you.

Catalog companies that are a part of the Mail Order Gardening Association are reputable and will work quickly to resolve problems to your satisfaction.

E-mail questions to Jeff Rugg, Kendall County unit educator, University of Illinois Extension at jrugg@uiuc.edu.

Â© Copley News Service

A Greener View: Gardening catalogs and certain garden centers offer more plant varieties by Jeff_Rugg