

A Greener View: Choosing quality garden catalog companies

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: I get a few garden catalogs in the mail, but I don't know if they are reputable companies. Can you help me know which companies I should order from?

A: Probably the safest companies to order gardening products from are ones that have a local store that you can purchase from. The second safest group are the companies that are members of the Mailorder Gardening Association. It is a nonprofit organization that helps the companies provide better service. Since most garden catalog companies are small family operations, it is in their best interest to help their customers.

In fact, the most recent survey shows that 95 percent of mail-order garden shoppers were very or somewhat satisfied with the way the seeds, bulbs and plants they ordered grew in their gardens. An equal percentage (95 percent) of mail-order customers were very or somewhat satisfied with the way their gardening products and supplies performed.

A full 90 percent of all mail-order gardening shoppers had no complaints whatsoever about their dealings with the MGA-member mail-order catalogs and Web sites from which they ordered gardening products.

The MGA also sponsors a garden grant program for school-age children to introduce them to the joys of gardening and the values it instills.

The organization recruits judges from outside interests to decide which products are worthy of receiving the MGA Green Thumb Awards. For 2007, there were five plant winners and five product winners. The winning products were selected based on their uniqueness, technological innovation, ability to solve a gardening problem or provide a gardening opportunity, and potential appeal to gardeners.

Brent and Becky's Bulbs won with the "Fire of Love" tulip. The flower is deep red, and its double petals are

ruffled. The foliage is extremely variegated with streaks of white, pink, green and purple on the wavy leaves. It blooms in mid-spring with flowers that reach 10 to 14 inches tall.

Growing apricots has been a challenge for many homeowners because the trees tend to bloom so early that late frosts can kill an entire year's crop. Sugar Pearls, from Henry Fields, blooms much later than other apricot varieties, ensuring larger and more reliable harvests for Northern gardeners. The fruit are self-pollinating so you only need one tree to get sweet golden-honey flavored apricots. Good for USDA zones 4-7.

"King Harry" makes growing organic potatoes easier than ever. Developed by Cornell University and field tested by Wood Prairie Farm, "King Harry" is resistant to the pests that bother Irish potatoes - including Colorado potato beetles and potato leafhoppers, because they dislike its hairy leaves.

Rudbeckia "Prairie Gold" has pinwheels-colored flowers of red and yellow. This native perennial is covered in blooms from July to September and needs no deadheading to encourage new blooms. It grows 3 to 5 feet tall in USDA zones 4-8. It is available from Select Seeds & Plants.

Like the apricot listed above, the freestone TruGold Peach produced by Henry Fields is a late-blooming variety that misses early frosts. It is an extremely vigorous grower that produces so many fruit that by its third year, the fruit must be thinned to avoid stunting the growth of the tree. This self-pollinating tree will grow in USDA zones 5-8.

The Squirrel Buster Plus is a squirrel-proof bird feeder from Audubon Workshop. The openings at the bottom of the feeder align with seed ports to give birds access to the seeds. But when squirrels, chipmunks and large birds climb aboard, their weight automatically forces the shroud down, which blocks access to the seed. It disassembles without tools for easy cleaning, is dishwasher safe and carries a lifetime warranty.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, I like biodegradable pots for my garden transplants. Gardener's Supply now has Cowpots made from composted recycled dairy fiber (cow manure). You can place your transplants with the pot directly into the ground, without damaging any roots. They will decompose into the soil, providing a

natural, petroleum-free fertilizer for the plant.

The new Garden Patch planter from The Garden Patch is the perfect way for anyone to enjoy home-grown tomatoes, vegetables, flowers, berries and herbs, even if you don't have the room or time for a garden. All you need is sunlight and a few feet of space on the deck, patio or balcony. The unique design automatically adds the right amount of water and fertilizer exactly when your plants need it.

Tropical water lilies need warm water. The Thermoplanter from Lilypons, extends the growing season of tropical water lilies in all climates by heating the soil in the flower pot. By keeping the soil 20 degrees warmer than the water temperature in which the Thermoplanter pot sits, the Thermoplanter creates a microclimate that effectively adds two USDA hardiness zones. The result is a dramatically longer growing season for tropical water lilies in virtually all U.S. growing zones.

Many baby boomer gardeners are downsizing their gardens, and many would-be gardeners simply have no yard in which to plant a garden. The all-inclusive Square Foot Success Kit from Gardener's Supply, is ideal for any gardener with limited space and time. The growing container's footprint is only one square foot, which is a great size for dwarf or patio-sized vegetables. The kit includes a self-watering planter, container mix, organic fertilizer and a conical wire plant support.

For more information on any of these winning products, check your local garden center. If they don't have them, then visit the association Web site at www.mailordergardening.com.

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