

Understanding seed catalogues

SEED CATALOGUES STARTED TO ARRIVE IN MY MAIL IN DECEMBER. Now is the time to dig them out and start planning this year's garden. If you haven't received enough catalogues, there are dozens listed in January gardening magazines and on websites. But note that, while most catalogues are free, some charge a minimal price. You can also view many catalogues online at websites such as *icangarden.com* and *canadiangardening.com*.

Warning: treat a catalogue the same as you would a sales person. Read it carefully and understand that the wonderful pictures and descriptions are chosen for a reason – to sell the product! Besides looking for the obvious, plant size, flower colour, scan the descriptions for details such as:

- ✍ Days to maturity – Knowing how many days a plant takes to mature after it germinates is important when choosing seeds. Long-season crops need to be started indoors to mature in our short growing season. Harvest can be extended over a number of weeks by planting seeds with different maturity dates.
- ✍ Seeds per package – A package of seed can range from 5 seeds to several 100. And the price of the package of seed is not always directly related to the amount of seeds it contains.
- ✍ Germination instructions – While the commonly grown annuals will germinate easily, others require specific temperatures and light conditions. Perennial seeds often have a deeper dormancy and need special conditions to germinate. Knowing the conditions in advance helps you decide what seeds to buy. It's also good to know the outdoor growing conditions the plants require. Placing plants in their ideal spot usually ensures a good display.
- ✍ Latin and common names – Common names guide most gardeners through the catalogue. Unfortunately, many plants have more than one common name and a Latin name is needed to be sure of the right plant variety. Latin names are used throughout the world thus enabling anyone to identify the specific plant by referencing it in any gardening book.

Some words to watch out for: “New” can mean that this is the plant's debut year, but it usually means that it is the first year that it's being offered in this catalogue. “Exclusive” refers to the fact that this variety is only sold through this seed house. Often these seeds have been developed in their own trial plots. “Heirloom” refers to seed varieties that can be traced back to early settlers. Heirloom flowers are often smaller with a stronger scent than new hybrids. Likewise heirloom vegetables will often be smaller, and less uniform while being more flavorful. Many of the older varieties will also be more susceptible to diseases. It's important to preserve heritage seeds as they contain a wide range of genetic diversification.

Compare the ratings of plants in different catalogues and books. If in doubt, check with other gardeners and reputable garden centres. They will be happy to tell you of their experiences with a particular plant.

Finally, factor in the cost of shipping and handling. It is often enough to double the cost of orders if you want only one or two packets of seeds! You can save money here by getting together with other gardeners to place a single order.