

Understanding seed catalogues

CHRISTMAS IS OVER. The New Year is about to come in. We gardeners know what that means... it's seed catalogue time. So many catalogues, so many exotic looking varieties. How to choose? How to determine what those descriptions mean? For the novice (and for those of us who never learn), here's a primer to catalogue terminology, adapted from *ICanGarden.com*:

Challenging - Plants that are labeled "challenging" are the opposite of hardy (see below). They will probably die. In law this is called a disclaimer. When it dies, don't bother asking for a refund.

Choice – There are plants that are choice and plants that are presumably not choice. If you can see no difference, "choice" is likely a signal that they're overstocked on that item and need to move it out. **Rare and choice** means they can't even squeeze through the storeroom.

Common - These are the plants of our childhood, those that have bloomed in gardens for five generations with only the most inept care. Catalogs hardly ever sell common plants, but they often use the word, as in, "this flower is much improved over its common ancestor."

Durable - If they do want to sell a common plant, this is what they call it.

Exclusive - The seed company has paid the breeder a fat fee (which they will recover from us) so that he won't let anyone else sell it. If you must have this variety, there's only one place to get it. At least if you want it this season. Next season the arrangement may expire and you can find it everywhere at half the price.

Hardy - This plant will live through the winter, maybe not in your garden, but somewhere. "Hardy to Zone 5" means it is hardy to Zone 6, but there is one known instance of it surviving north of that. And "Hardy with some protection" means it requires the kind of coddling that would make a flu-stricken husband seem stoic.

Light fragrance - Means that it doesn't have a heavy fragrance; you have to crush it and shove it up your nose to notice.

Limited supply – Don't bother racing to the post office, scribbling your order as you weave through traffic. "Limited supply" means either (1) they sold out the day before the catalogues were mailed, or (2) they're holding the handful that they have for close friends, relatives, or favoured customers far more discerning than you and me.

Mail order exclusive - Make sure the shelves at Giant Tiger aren't groaning under pots of the stuff before you send in your order.

May bloom first year - Not in my garden it won't, and probably not in yours either. Note that there's no mention of a second year.

Rare – See "Choice".

Tolerates light shade - Does so in the same way that teenage girls tolerate younger brothers, that is, grudgingly. Tends to be pale, leggy and disinterested.

Vigorous grower - These plants will devour your house and garden by July, choking out everything that gets in their way. Remember, kudzu is a “vigorous grower”.

Will bloom first year if planted early enough – “Early enough” is January.

Winter interest - This plant is stultifyingly boring in spring, summer and fall.