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Seed Catalogs

While the weather outside may or may not feel like winter, it is seed catalog time. Avid gardeners should be getting inundated with 2006 catalogs from now until spring. I get really excited about the first 3 or 4, but after I've received the second or third version of the same catalog from the same company, I get a bit tired of it all. Here are some things to remember about buying seed from a catalog.

Variety

Many of the well known mail-order seed houses sell the same varieties or cultivars of seeds. This can be frustrating and overwhelming, especially when there are a wide range of prices associated with various suppliers. While most suppliers are reputable, some companies specialize in certain cultivars or species of crops which may allow them to charge a more competitive price for those items than for others. If you order from 5 or 6 different seed companies just to get the best price on each type of seed, you may end up spending more in shipping than you would be saving. Secondly, cheap seed may not always mean good seed. While all suppliers have to meet minimum germination standards, some will routinely exceed that minimum. For example, last year, I ordered some very unique pepper seeds to start in my basement a few weeks prior to planting. Pepper seeds often have a low germination rate. The supplier I selected was fairly expensive, but I liked the cultivars they offered, so I felt the cost was justified. I calculated about a 60% germination rate so I heavily over planted. Well my expensive seed paid off! Every one of my seeds germinated. All my neighbors had pepper plants too!!

Service

I like to select 80% of my seed from one or two main suppliers where I've been treated right in the past. I might take a chance on 20% of my seed purchased each year from a new vendor, but inevitably, I find myself returning to the suppliers with the best service and the most viable seed. The supplier I mentioned earlier contacted me in May with a mistake they made on my order the prior December once. They had inadvertently mislabeled some seed in their packaging department and shipped me seed that was a year old. They discovered this mistake, refunded my money and offered to replace next year's seed. Never mind that the year old seed germinated perfectly, they just wanted to make it right. There certainly is value in doing business that way.

Seed Saving

Does anyone out there save their own seed? That can be a great way to preserve older "heirloom" varieties and those varieties that have been adapted over the years for your garden site. Seed Savers Exchange is the place for open pollinated, heirloom varieties.