How to Read a Seed Catalog

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Deciphering the mumbo-jumbo

Just as the snowdrops and crocus come to life as the New Year begins, a plethora of seed catalogs starts appearing in our mailboxes. Visualize yourself seated in your favorite armchair surrounded by a pile of this free information, notepad or laptop in hand, dreaming of your garden to come. All of those tantalizingly beautiful photos, the flashy descriptions and the cryptic symbols can overwhelm our senses. Volumes of valuable information await if only we can decipher the mumbo-jumbo to find it.

The first important information you will want to look for is your hardiness zone. Other mapping systems exist, but one of the most commonly used throughout the United States is the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map (www.usna.usda.gov). This map consists of eleven zones in the United States that are based on the lowest average winter temperature.

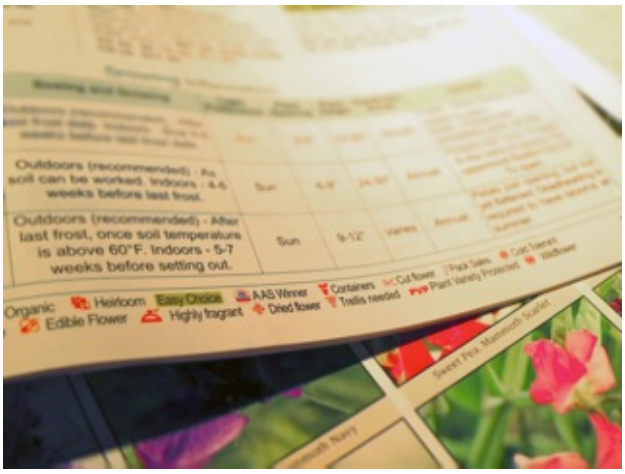
Skagit County has a number of zones that range from Zone 5 in the mountains to Zone 8 along the water. Check the Zone Map to discover your particular area's needs. You can extend your zone somewhat by creating microclimates and other manipulations, but use your zone number as a general guideline.

The next number you might note is "days to harvest" or "days to maturity." This can mean either the average number of days from sowing the seed to harvest or, in the case of slow crops, the time it takes after you set out your transplants before you can expect to harvest. There can be quite a disparity in these two, so please look closely at the description in your particular catalog to interpret which way this number is being calculated. If in doubt, look up the seed on the computer for verification.

Also note that maturity dates may not factor in heat units available in your area. For example, a plant grown in Eastern Washington may mature at an earlier date than one grown here in the Pacific Northwest. Although days to harvest can be highly variable, it remains a good ballpark figure from which to work.

Think for a minute about where your plant will be located. There are many ways to make a more healthy plant, (e.g., great soil, compost, fertilizer), but you generally cannot change the light availability in a particular spot.

Catalogs may vary in the symbols used to show light requirements of particular plants. You may see a black circle indicating a plant that thrives in shade or a circle without color which may indicate a sun lover (usually described as six or more hours of sun per day).



Familiarize yourself with a catalog's special symbols, often found at the bottom of the page, before making your selection. *Photo by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

A half dark/half-light circle means the plant likes partial shade/partial sun. Some catalogs will even be more specific and add "morning sun, afternoon shade" or vice versa. Knowing these requirements will lead to happier, healthier plants.

Other helpful icons to look for include a sun indicating a plant which is heat tolerant; a snowflake showing cold tolerance; or a pot meaning it makes a good container plant. Again, symbols may be different in each catalog.

If you previously experienced a particular problem in your garden, such as late blight or wilt, you might choose seeds that are disease resistant or disease tolerant. Both designations are good traits but have different meanings.

"Disease resistant" means the plant has been bred to resist common disease problems and probably will not get the disease. "Disease tolerant" means the plant may get the disease but will tolerate it better than a non-resistant variety. Designations to look for include LB (late blight), V (verticillium wilt), F (fusarium wilt) and other symbols that may appear in an index in the back of your catalog.

Plants may be listed as annuals, perennials or biennials. How to choose? Annuals refer to plants that perform an entire life cycle from seed to flower to seed in a single growing season before all roots, stems and leaves die as temperatures get below freezing. Annuals may self-sow for the next year but this does not make them perennials.

Perennials are plants that continue to grow for at least three years. Typically the top portion of the plant goes dormant in the winter months and new growth comes from the original root system the following spring.

Biennials will spend the first growing season establishing themselves and storing energy but may not bloom until season two before dying off at the freeze.

The final question we need to discuss is the difference between F1, OP and Heirloom varieties. F1 means that it is a first generation hybrid which is a cross between two known parents used to produce a variety with the best traits of both parents. These plants are often more disease resistant, better tasting, more tolerant of adverse growing conditions (hardy), and more uniform in habit. However, if you plan to save seeds from your F1 plants to produce a second F2 generation, beware. They rarely reproduce the same variety as the original F1.

Left: A good catalog will offer more than pretty pictures of vegetables and flowers. Look for advice on growing conditions, disease resistance, problem insects and harvesting for the best flavor. Reputable companies want you to learn and become a successful gardener. **Right:** The wide selection of seed and garden catalogs can be overwhelming. With most catalogs also available on the Internet, detailed results of vegetable trials and taste tests give the average consumer more information than previously available. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

If you want seeds that come "true" from the seeds you have sown from year to year, you may prefer the Open Pollinated (OP) varieties. Although these are genetically stable plants, there may be variations between individuals due to the natural pollination process.

Heirlooms are open pollinated varieties that have developed outside the commercial plant trade and have a historical or cultural significance. The generally accepted standard is that these plants have been around at least fifty years.

We've uncovered some of the mysteries found in reading seed catalogs, and more questions may arise along the way. The most important thing to learn when reading all of the fine print descriptions is to mentally remove most of the adjectives, think about what you like and need, and winnow the hundreds of offerings down to a few that best suit your own garden.

Happy reading!

RESOURCES:

- *Annuals, Biennials & Perennials.* Master Gardeners Clackamas County. Oregon State University Extension.
- *Seed Saving: Knowing the Difference Between Hybrids, Heirlooms and Open Pollinated Plants.* John Porter, Extension Agent. West Virginia University Extension Master Gardeners, Charleston, West Virginia.
- *How to Read Seed Catalogs.* Dr. Leonard Perry, Extension Professor at the University of Vermont. February 6, 2012.

- *Seed Catalogs Made Easy*. Linda Whitlock, Michigan State University Extension. February 27, 2012.
- *Understanding Seed Catalogs.* Greg Stack, Extension Educator, University of Illinois Extension. December 28,2012.
- *How to Read a Seed Catalog.* Jean Nick. Organic Gardening Magazine.