



SELECTING THE BEST GARDENING CATALOGS

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As you look through those beautiful garden catalogs you have been receiving for the past month or so, I suspect you, like many gardeners, are wondering is all the stuff these catalogs are telling me true. Can I rely on them and their information? What makes one catalog better than another.

What should a gardener look for in a gardening catalog? Sherry Vance, coordinator of the Bailey Horticultural Catalog Collection at the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell, recommends the following tips:

Age of the horticultural business can be a good indicator. If the mail-order nursery or garden supply business has been around for a good number of years, it might suggest it provides quality products and service. A poor quality business generally doesn't last very long.

The more information the catalog supplies the better. You want to know as much about the plants or seeds you are buying as you can. A very brief write-up may suggest the company hasn't done much research on that plant or knows very little about it. In particular, check for plant descriptions. Does the catalog specify what kind of soil or growing conditions the plant prefers? How about height, size at maturity, hardy to what zones? (Columbia County is predominately in the -10 to -20 degree F hardiness zone.) Does the catalog include both botanical name and common name? Always avoid those that list only a common name since the plant may turn out to be something different than you expected. The botanical name is the best way to get to know and track a particular plant. Vance suggests that companies that use the Latin (botanical) names of plants are making a real attempt to be accurate, complete, and informative.

Know what the company's policies are for ordering by mail, shipping, returns, and replacement or credit. They should inform you what the minimum order is to order by mail. When will the items be shipped and how? Will substitutes be sent if ordered material is not available? And what can you do if the material arrives in poor condition or plants fail to survive and grow?

Some catalogs are well-illustrated with color photographs. While this generally costs more to produce and this cost will be passed on to the customer, a color photograph is better to help you select the right plant for the right place, especially for new plants or the novice gardener. Also, some color catalogs are not free, but the cost may make the catalog well worth it and may even be deducted from your first order. Check this out.

Also, be sure to refer to three or more catalogs to select from. Gardeners should not assume that the same plant will be the same cost from different companies. However, be sure to check out the size of the plant to be sent and the company's return policy and plant survival guarantee. These could make the same plant much less or more expensive in one catalog, but increase the risk. Shopping around among and between gardening catalogs is a consumer strategy that works well in garden catalogs, too. Also, consult with friends, relatives, and neighbors who have used garden catalogs before. Their advice and insight can be helpful. This may prove to be another case of you get what you pay for - truly a "buyer beware" situation.

Be sure to record the names of catalogs and companies that you do business with that provide all or most of what you are looking for including quality products and service. This will save you time and effort the next time you want to use gardening catalogs. Also, always take the opportunity to look at new catalogs. The next one you receive or pick up may be exactly what you've been looking for. It's sort of like trying a new flower or vegetable variety. It may be far better than those old-timers you've grown for years.

Using gardening catalogs should not be a total substitute for all your gardening purchases, however. We have many fine garden centers, nurseries, and garden-supply businesses in and around Columbia County. They may offer the same material; in larger size; already growing; at a lower or equal price; without the shipping costs; and so forth.. And we all benefit when you buy locally. Happy gardening!