How to Read a Plant Catalog

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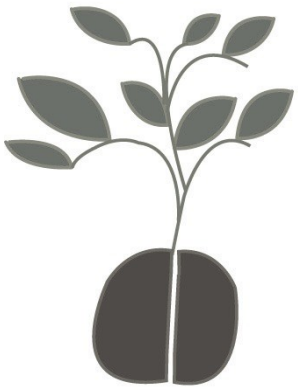
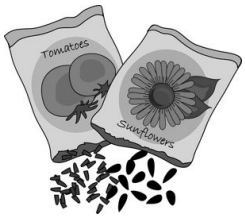


During the hectic holiday season, the avid gardener was able to plunder the garden for greens, berries, and other attractive plant materials to decorate their home. After the holidays are over, the months of January and February bring a lull in the gardeners' year. There is little to do in the garden and the indoor blooms of forced bulbs and poinsettias while cheery, are not totally satisfying. Fortunately, this is the season when all of those gorgeously illustrated plant and seed catalogs start arriving. The frustrated gardener can grab a cup of tea or coffee, curl up in a favorite easy chair in a warm spot of the house, and dream of the glories of the spring and summer garden.



There is one slight problem with this winter idyll. How can you tell if that beautiful plant will be content to stay in the area where you plant it and not try to thuggishly take over your entire yard (and maybe your neighbors yards too)? Will you actually get to taste those delicious fruits and vegetables or will they fail to ripen in your island garden or be attached by pests before you harvest them? Catalogs have their own language which is usually briefly explained on the inside cover or order page. These explanations are not always clear or as detailed as the home gardener could wish. Terms and abbreviations in parenthesis below are ones that can be found in many catalogs.

Hardiness Zones. Catalogs generally adhere to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) plant hardiness zone map (but check their page of general information to make sure). The zone hardiness map shows the lowest temperatures that should be expected based on recorded temperatures between 1974 and 1986. The San Juan Islands fall in zone 8b (except for the western edge of San Juan Island which is in zone 9a) along with Galveston, Texas, wide swaths of the South, and parts of Northern Mexico. Lowest expected temperature is obviously only part of the story as our climate is certainly much cooler than these other zone 8a areas. A few catalogs recognize this fact by showing two zones ranges for their plants, one for the South and one for the West.

Light Requirements. Catalogs generally specify whether plants prefer shade, semi-shade or sun. Shade is classified as less than 2 hours of direct sun each day, while full sun is more than 6 hours of direct sun. Part shade occupies the middle area between 2 and 6 hours of direct sun. Not all part shade is the same, however. If you have less than 6 hours of full sun in parts of your garden, but that sun falls in the early afternoon when it is warmer, you will have greater luck with sun loving plants. Conversely, if you have a garden spot that receives only a few hours of sunshine in the morning, shade-loving plants will be more likely to prosper. Plants that receive too little light are likely to grow tall and spindly with yellow foliage, while plants that receive too much sun may burn, dry out, or shrivel up.

Soil Types. "Acid loving" plants need soils with a pH of 7.5 or higher, while "neutral soils have a pH of 6.5 to 7 and alkaline soils have a pH of 6 or less. Simple soil testing kits can be found at most garden stores. The pH of the soil determines the nutrients that are available to your plantings and is a major factor in the growth of many plants.

Annual, Perennial, or Biennial. Annual plants (A) have a lifespan of a single growing season while biennials (B) grow for two years and bloom and fruit in their second year. Perennials (P) will grow for multiple growing seasons.

Hardy, Half-Hardy, and Tender. A plant that is hardy is more resistant to diseases, pests and winter cold than most plants and may be more vigorous and productive. Hardy perennials (HP) and biennials (HB) can be overwintered in the garden and hardy annuals (HA) can be sown either in early spring or in some cases in late fall or early winter. A half-hardy plant tolerates some cold and light frosts, but half-hardy perennials (HHP) and biennials (HHB) must be moved to a cold frame or other

cool dry storage for the winter before the first killing frost (generally around Nov. 11 in the San Juans), and half-hardy annuals (HHA) cannot be sown outdoors until the early spring. Tender plants do not survive cold and frost and are generally grown as houseplants or in a greenhouse. Tender plants that are grown outdoors must be brought indoors before the first frost while tender seedlings must be started indoors and transplanted to your garden only after all danger of frost has passed.

Plant Spacing. This is a guide to how close together seeds and plants that are similar should be planted to provide maximum plant health and good crop yields under normal growing conditions for that plant. You may need to make adjustments to these guidelines if you are using an intensive planting method or if your conditions are less than ideal for that plant.

Plant Height. This is an indication of how high a plant is likely to grow in your garden if you provide the plant with its preferred growing conditions.

Planting Time. Some seeds and bulbs, such as tulips, need a hibernation period in the cold earth before they will grow and bloom while tender plants are extremely frost or cold sensitive and cannot be sown outdoors until all danger of frost has passed (generally March 24 in the San Juans) or the soil temperature has warmed up. Some catalogs provide this information in their plant descriptions, while others print that information on the seed or bulb packets.

Bloom or Harvest Time. This may be expressed in terms of the month in which plants can be expected to bloom or produce fruit (e.g., May-June) or days to harvest (e.g., 85 days) from planting or transplanting for seeds that are generally started indoors. These dates are based on the growing conditions in the location where the company is located, unless their explanatory material indicates otherwise. This means that a tomato that fruits in 85 days in Galveston, Texas could disappoint in Friday Harbor because our days are cooler. The American Horticultural Society produces a "heat days map" which shows the average number of days per year when temperatures rise above 86° F. Friday Harbor is in zone 3 with 8 to 14 days, while Galveston fall sin zone 9 with 121 to 150 days above 86° F. That is why gardeners generally have better success with seeds from growers in the Pacific Northwest. "Early" varieties of fruits and vegetables generally do better in our climate.

Pollination Type. If you want to collect seeds from your garden for next year's plants, you will need to know whether a particular seed you are looking at is an heirloom or open pollinated (OP), self-pollinating (SP) or a hybridized plant (F1) which is created from cross-fertilizing two different plants. OP and SP seeds will generally grow true to type while the seeds of F1 plants will not grow true, but will produce progeny that exhibit tremendous variation, displaying various characteristics (good or bad) of the plants they were created from. Certain plants (e.g., sweet cherries) are self unfruitful, which means they will not set fruit and seed unless they are pollinated by a different cultivar of the same species.

Male and Female Plants. Plants have evolved a number of different ways to procreate. Some (dioecious) produce "perfect" flowers that contain both male and female parts, so they are self-fertile. Others (monoecious) produce some flowers with male parts and others with female parts, so they are also self-fertile. some plants, however, produce flowers with only male parts (androecious) or female parts (gynoecious), so they need to be planted with other plants of the same species to produce fruits and seed. A few plants (parthenocarpic) do not require any form of pollination to bear fruit.

Disease and Pest Resistant. Plant breeders select and hybridize plants for certain traits such as taste, color, vigor or disease resistance. For certain plants (e.g., apples which are subject to anthracnose, apple scab, and powdery mildew) where resistance to common diseases or pests is very important, disease resistance may be a primary facto in making plant selections. Some catalogs provide minimal information, specifying that plants are disease or pest resistant, while others provide detailed information as to which pests and diseases a particular plant may resist. A few catalogs

also provide information on plants that are more resistant to deer damage. This does not mean that deer will not eat those plants, only that they are likely to sample them, but prefer other plants in the area when they are available.

Tomato Types. Tomatoes are classified as either determinate or indeterminate. Determinate tomatoes are bush types that grow to a relatively compact 4-foot height, then set fruit on their terminal buds, ripen all of their fruit at about the same time, then die. They need little staking or pruning. Indeterminate or vining tomatoes can grow up to 10 feet tall, need substantial staking, and set fruit throughout the growing season until they are killed by the first hard frost.

Peas and Beans. These come in 2 major types, bush and pole. Bush plants can be grown on short trellises or mounded while pole plants require a fence or tall trellis on which they can grow.

Root Stocks. Fruit trees and grapes are generally grafted to increase plant vigor, fruit size and disease resistance and to limit the plant's ultimate size. Most catalogs provide information as to whether plants are grafted, but the degree of information varies widely. Some tell you only that the plants will be dwarf (5-12 feet), semi-dwarf (10-15 feet) or standard (15-20 feet), while others identify the specific rootstock used. If the stock is identified, information about the stock can be found on the Internet to help you make your selection.

Plant Patents. Many Hybridized plants are patented (PP), which means that propagation of the plant for sale is restricted by law. PPAF means that the plant is not yet patented but a patent has been applied for. PVR is the Australian and New Zealand equivalent of PP. CPBR refers to the consortium of Biotech Research.

Award Winners. "AAS" plants are All American Selections. "RHS" plants are Award of Garden Merit winners from the Royal Horticultural Society in England. Fleuroselect (FL) are winners of European gold (G), quality (Q) or novelty (N) awards. NIAB plants have won awards from the National Institute of Agriculture Botany in England.

Code Words. "Vigorous" plants may become rampant in your garden if you don't watch out. It is best to do some research to find out if they are aggressive and if seedlings are easy to pull out of places where they are not wanted. "Fast growing" plants can easily outgrow their neighbors and their location. "Inoculant" coated seeds (primarily beans and peas) have been coated with a substance to promote nitrogen fixing in the roots, which increases plant yields. "Cut and come again", "everbearing" and "reblooming" plants will yield multiple crops if the first and subsequent crops are harvested before seed sets. "Moisture loving" plants will need substantial water during a long, relatively dry summer while plants for "dry" areas should not be planted near a spring, lake or stream. "Winter keeper" or "keeper" fruits and vegetables can be stored for several months for later use.

Now that all of that is clear, put on the pot, draw up your favorite easy chair, grab your catalogs and start dreaming of garden days to come. Your only remaining problem will be deciding which if all the wonderful seeds and plants on offer to buy.