

Garden Catalog Season Gives Gardeners Chance To Explore, Shop For Next Year's Seeds

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URBANA – January begins the annual flight of vegetable, flower, and fruit tree catalogs to your mailbox or inbox. Depending on your level of gardening, the catalogs are starting to arrive frequently and en mass.



“It used to be you would get either a vegetable catalog or a fruit catalog or flower catalog,” says [Richard Hentschel, University of Illinois Extension](#) horticulture educator. “Many catalogs now contain something for everyone, including the garden gadget addicts.”

Illinois gardeners should start by looking for plants that thrive in USDA Hardiness Zone 5. Many catalogs offer heirloom vegetables, flowers, and fruit trees. These heirloom varieties can be some of the best tasting and or more unusual looking fruits and vegetables we get to eat.

“They are called heirloom since they have had no or very little traditional breeding,” Hentschel says. “This can mean they will have more disease problems though and often less production as well.”

With all the plant breeding work going on, vegetables can take on new colors that are a bit outside the lines. Consider a blue potato or perhaps the more acceptable colors of green peppers being yellow, red, purple, orange. These look great in salads and other dishes. It used to be that Swiss chard was green, but it is now also available in shades of pink, orange, yellow, gold, white and purple. Newer varieties have a slenderer stalk and can be used to brighten up salads or cooked as you would use spinach.

Small fruits such as strawberries come in a variety of shades of red now. More small fruits options are also now available. Plant breeders have had success transforming smaller fruiting shrubs such as currants, gooseberries, and Aronia into well performing plants for the home garden. Rhubarb and asparagus are great additions to the garden.

Technology has been transforming gardening. There is a garden gadget for everyone. Gardeners who start their own seeds will find a variety of pots, seed starting soil mixes, markers, and more.

“You can start your seeds in flats individual cell packs like you see when you buy your annual flowers, or even expanding pellets,” Hentschel says.

Planting can be done in pots made of plastic, bio-renewable materials, or an organic fiber. Additional accessories that make seed starting easier include warming mats in sizes from one six pack to a full tray, plant stands with growing lights and self-watering trays, or a variety of temporary outdoor structures to use to grow out and harden vegetable plants before they go into the garden.

Hand tools are forever evolving each with their own unique characteristics.

“Choose wisely and choose what feels comfortable for you,” Hentschel says. “Your gardening style changes as you age, so will your tools.”

If your mailbox is not quite full enough, go online and sign up for a few more. It is quick and easy.

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