

By now, your kitchen table is full of the latest garden catalogs. Once you order one catalog, dozens more seem to mysteriously appear each year. Yes, we all wish to support our local garden centers, but then we read about that must-have plant variety that just cannot be found locally. In addition, for us gardeners that turn our basements into plant producing factories, catalogs provide us with a convenient source of the best varieties to start indoors for ourselves, for neighbors, and for our clubs' garden sales. Often, tools and garden supplies that we desire are not found locally.

Before you start ordering, decide what you want to grow, and if you have room for it. Do you have seeds left over from last year that are still viable? Will the local garden sales carry your desired plant? Make a master list of what you want, mark prices from different catalogs, check the list twice, and reduce the list to match your budget. Don't overspend! Consider sharing an order with a gardening friend. You can share seed packages or split an order.

Many catalogs provide super-saturated color pictures of their offerings. The best catalogs provide detailed descriptions of their plants and good cultural information. Some catalogs are even so good that I keep them for future reference. Sometimes the descriptions are overly flowery, and must be taken with a grain of salt and caution. Carefully read each description entirely and understand what is being offered. Be careful when buying perennials, shrubs, and trees. Make sure that you purchase plants that are hardy to our zone 4 climate, or to a lower zone number. Zone 5 plants and higher may survive here in milder winters, in well-protected areas, or with thick layers of protective mulch. Sources in our northern region will carry more of what we can grow. Check the water requirements; will it do well in your wet soil, your clay soil, or your sandy Sahara-like soil? Will it do well in our humid summers? Does it have disease resistance? Do you have enough sun, or enough shade? Do you really want to work hard to make your very alkaline soil acid enough to grow blueberries, cranberries, or rhododendrons? That tomato variety may produce a thousand pounds of tomato, but does it taste any better than cardboard – what about that flavor? Compare descriptions and prices with other catalogs. Read about the variety on state extension (www.extension.umn.edu) or .edu sites.

When I run into an unknown nursery, I like to check Dave's Garden Watchdog where gardeners write in and critique mail-order sources. (<http://davesgarden.com/products/gwd/#b>). If I am searching for the source of a new plant or seed variety, the University of Minnesota's Plant Information Online (<http://plantinfo.umn.edu/>) will direct me to a supplier. Seed Saver's Exchange's [Fruit, Berry, and Nut Inventory](#) is a fascinating book listing descriptions and sources of all fruits and nuts available in our country. When selecting items, I look for flowers and vegetables that have become All-America Selections winners, perennials that have been selected as Perennial Plants of the Year or have won the European Fleuroselect Gold medal or other awards, and roses selected as an All-America Rose Selection. Heritage Perennials (www.Perennials.com) has a large database and good descriptions of many perennials.

Botanical Latin names are important. Different plants carry the name bluebell, or the same plant may be known by different names in different localities, but only *Mertensia virginica* is the Virginia bluebell. No confusion.

Look out for catch phrases: "vigorous", "good naturalizer", "rapidly growing groundcover", or "multiplies rapidly" may become that future aggressive pest-plant that takes hours of garden time to remove. "New" may mean new to the market, a plant available in other catalogs that is new to this catalog, or an old variety reintroduced under a jazzier name. Caution and more research is necessary. If you can wait, don't order that new plant until next year, when the price may drop and more performance information is available.

Check the shipping size of the plant. Often, plants are shipped in smaller-sized pots and may take several years to reach full size. Check the expected shipping date, so that you do not get plants at a time too early to plant outdoors or too late for good growth and establishment. Check costs of shipping and handling, which might suggest better bargains in another catalog or another attempt to find it locally. Check warranties and guarantees carefully. Keep good records of your purchases and receipts. Even the best companies make mistakes, but will try hard to correct the problem if notified promptly. Not all companies are so diligent.

Shrubs, trees, and fruit are usually shipped bare root (the soil is shaken off the plants and the plants are stored under refrigeration). Bare root plants save on shipping costs for both the nursery and you. However, bare root plants do require more attention and careful watering to be successfully grown.

As in local purchasing, check the final size and shape of the plant. The tiny cute arborvitae might eventually become a monster trying to take over your sidewalk, to elevate your overhead electrical wires, or to push over your house. Standard-sized apple trees may tower to 40 feet overhead, while a dwarf variety may be a more manageable 10 feet.

It is best to order your living items as soon in the season as possible. Nurseries often run out of items as the season progresses, or may tend to send smaller stock later in the season. Some nurseries offer discounts or free plant material for early orders. Others have late season specials and other specials, and will notify you if you get onto their email lists.

Above all, have some fun! Try something new to you this year, and let me know about it! Thanks.

Happy Gardening,
Joe Baltrukonis



**"One of the healthiest ways to gamble is with a spade and a package of seeds."
---Dan Bennett, Comedian**