

BACK TO THE GARDEN

PRETTY PICTURES, HARD DECISIONS

BY PETER GARNHAM



The most difficult decisions a gardener has to make revolve around what to grow *next* year. These choices are made harder when the seed catalogs start to arrive during the winter. When it's freezing cold outside, those glorious color photos can seduce us into ordering things we've never before contemplated growing.

There is nothing wrong with being adventurous, within limits. But just as a farmer has to have an assured market for what he or she grows, before the seed goes into the ground, gardeners should at least ask themselves, "If I successfully grow this, what am I going to do with it?"

A couple of years ago, I grew a lot of radicchio, about 200 row feet. I enjoy a little of this chicory in salads, but it grew very well and I had a surplus. I was able to sell some, and I gave a lot away, but I had, in essence, created a small problem for myself. Since then, I have grown it in very limited quantities. The same situation applies in the home garden—grow what you really like to eat.

It is best to experiment within the boundaries of something you enjoy. Every year I grow three or four varieties of lettuce that I haven't grown before. This allows me to find the occasional variety that does well in my growing conditions, looks good, and—most importantly—tastes good. That variety gets added to my annual list. I follow the same routine with tomatoes, peas, beans, peppers and cabbage.

Since seeds are the cheapest thing you put into your garden, if you put a price on your labor, tools, compost and water, choose your seed supplier carefully. Avoid chain-store seed brands because, even if the seeds were good when they started out (which many are not), these stores know or care little about storing seed properly. I've seen seed displays getting baked in the sun shining through a window, or stored in damp areas. Some people make the mistake of buying these seeds because they are a dollar or so cheaper than seeds from reliable sources. This is definitely a false economy.

I buy all my seeds by mail order or over the Internet. They come properly packed, straight from the companies' climate-controlled storage. After checking them off against what I ordered, I store them in a cheap Styrofoam cooler, which keeps them dry and in the dark. I group varieties, such as tomato, lettuce, and so on, in individual freezer bags with a zip top.

Good storage ensures good seed viability, and allows them to keep from year to year. Remember, though, that even then some seeds have limited life spans. To learn more about this, consult Suzanne Ashworth's *Seed to Seed*.

Here is a short list of some seed suppliers that I have found from personal experience to be reliable sources.

Johnny's Selected Seeds, 955 Benton Avenue, Winslow, ME 04901. 877-564-6697, johnnyseeds.com. *Vegetable, flower, and herb seeds (some organic), tools and, supplies.*

Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, 2278 Baker Creek Road, Mansfield, MO 65704. 417-924-8917, rareseeds.com. *Flower, herb and organic vegetable seeds, and including rare varieties of melon seeds.*

Renee's Garden Seeds, 6116 Highway 9 Felton, CA 95018 888-880-7228, reneesgarden.com. *Vegetable, flower, and herb seeds, and seed collections.*

Territorial Seed Company, P.O. Box 158, Cottage Grove, OR 97424. 800-626-0866, territorialseed.com. *Organic vegetable, flower, and herb seeds, tools, and supplies.*

If you get the 2007 catalogs from any (or all!) of these companies, or just visit their Web sites, you can be assured of some delicious winter reading. But try to remember not to get carried away too far. I will try to remember that myself. □

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