

Gardening by Mail Catalog and Web Shopping

Text by Kathy Jentz
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It is a new year, according to the calendar and according to your mailbox. January is National Mailorder Gardening Month. If you're like most gardeners you can tell it's the deep winter dormant season not by the chilly weather, but by the number of the mailorder garden catalogs flooding your mailbox right now.

This year, I'm making two gardening resolutions that many of you may want to share:

1. Plan, plan, plan, and then plant.
2. Try something new every few weeks: a new cultivar, a new plant nursery, or a new public garden to visit.

Mailorder garden catalogs can help with both resolutions. With a stack of catalogs, a warm lap blanket, and a hot beverage of your choice, you can spend some time dreaming about planting your 2009 garden. Winter is a great time to "take stock" and think about what you'd like to re-vamp or change.

"Garden catalogs show you new possibilities for your garden and also serve as helpful planning tools," says Camille Cimino, executive director of the Mailorder Gardening Association (MGA), which sponsors National Mailorder Gardening Month. "Garden catalogs offer the widest possible variety of plants, seeds, bulbs, and gardening supplies, including the newest products not yet available in retail stores. Plus, mailorder catalogs and online web sites offer useful tips and information to help you create a more beautiful garden."

I personally receive on average two or three catalogs per day, starting in late

December. If you didn't get a wide selection of gardening catalogs this year, you can go online to request some be sent to you. A good jumping off point is the Mailorder Gardening Association (MGA) web site (www.mailordergardening.com), which has several hundred mailorder garden companies listed with their full contact information and broken down by plant categories.

What are the advantages of mailorder or online ordering? According to the MGA, they are:

- A greater selection of products
- The convenience of armchair shopping
- Best guarantees in the business
- Plants and products delivered directly to you

I especially like that last bullet point. Getting that box of new plants or seeds delivered to your door is like opening a gift to yourself. What a great present to come home to after a long day at the office! And no need to haul heavy plants home on the metro.

One of the best things about getting mailorder garden catalogs or surfing their web sites is that you can do it from the warm comfort of your own home at any time. You are able to sit down and plot out your garden plan on paper before buying. You can dream big at this point and transport yourself to spring-

time with these luscious photos and detailed plant descriptions.

"Garden catalogs let you take a delightful mental vacation during cold winter days, and they serve as helpful planning tools that show you the newest plants and products for your garden," said Barbara Emerson, president of the Mailorder Gardening Association (MGA), which sponsors National Mailorder Gardening Month. "Gardening catalogs and web sites are a great way to get a jump-start on the gardening season. Many of them also provide helpful information for both new and long-time gardeners."

The MGA estimates that despite an economic slowdown, in 2009 more than 24 million American households will spend a total of more than \$3 billion dollars buying plants, bulbs, seeds and garden supplies from mailorder garden catalogs and web sites.

When I settle in to peruse this year's catalog offerings, I like to have a large scratch pad, Post-its, and pens nearby to sketch out garden bed ideas and keep track of what I want from each catalog. Here are some additional mailorder gardening suggestions:

- Choose plants appropriate to the DC area. That means Zones 6-7. Luckily for us, that is a very broad range of

plants. Most of what we cannot have in this area are tropicals, and if you must have an out-of-zone specimen, you can attempt it as a summer annual or try to keep in a heated greenhouse.

• Check out the helpful glossary of terms often included and read the descriptions carefully. If you don't know what an "indeterminate" tomato vine is, pick up the phone or go online and ask. Most garden catalogs have a very helpful, knowledgeable staff in their customer service departments.

• Order early to avoid "sold out" notices. I'm still depressed over that corkscrew vine I wanted so badly last year. This time, I've learned my lesson, although procrastination does have a few benefits. If you buy online and sign-up for a



company's mail list, in late spring you'll often be sent sale and clearance price offers on overstocked items. These are great for filling in where a perennial has not come back or a new plant has just not flourished as you'd hoped.

- Keep careful records of what you've ordered and where you intend to place them in your garden. This will help you immensely in unpacking your plants several months from now. This also avoids the "Now-where-do-I-put-this?" syndrome as you stand mid-garden with a new plant in hand.

When I do my actual ordering, it is online. That way I get a neatly printed receipt in my email box, print it out, and can make notes on that, as well.

Two extremely helpful online sites to visit before you place your orders are:

- Dave's Garden: The Garden Watchdog (<http://davesgarden.com/products/gwd/>) This site has contact information for hundreds of mailorder gardening companies and reviews from fellow gardeners who have used these companies.

• Garden Web: Sources Forum (<http://forums.gardenweb.com/forums/sources/>) This site allows you to search on posts from other gardeners or to post your own query. Many use it to look for a specific plant source or to ask about a catalog they've never ordered from before for other's opinions and experiences. When winter's bleached sky and faded colors give you the blahs, open up a garden catalog to remind you of life in full bloom.

Kathy's stack of garden catalog is awaiting the next snow day for her chance to sit down with a cup of cocoa in front of the fireplace to peruse them all. She is editor of *Washington Gardener* Magazine and can be reached at washingtongardener@rcn.com.

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- Landscape DIY vs. Pro
- Design an Herb Garden
- Prevent Gardener's Back
- Ladew Topiary Gardens
- Dandelions
- Cherry Trees

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- Turning Clay into Rich Soil
- Wild Garlic
- Wisteria
- Keeping a Garden Journal
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- Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens
- Edible Water Plants
- Water Lilies

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