

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Homan January 4, 2019

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New Year, New Seed Catalogs

The new year means many of us are making resolutions and starting fresh. Before we know it the gardening season will be here and we will have a chance to till the soil and plant seeds. But we don't have to be sad during the cold month of January because it's seed catalog season! I love opening my mail box this time of year and flipping through colorful seed catalogs with thoughts of spring in mind. It's easy to get overwhelmed by the amount of varieties and vast selection catalogs offer. Here are some tips of what to look for and how to take the stress out of starting seeds.

The first step is to assess your garden and landscape. Bundle up and take a walk outside. See what kind of plants you have and what you would like to change or add. Note open areas and if you will need plants that are sun or shade loving. Now is also a good time to think about your garden. What worked well and what varieties do you know were not successful? It can be helpful to keep a garden journal to remember what you have planted and the pros and cons of each vegetable. It's also important to sketch your garden so you can rotate crops properly.

Once you come inside and start thumbing through the catalogs it's easy to get carried away. Make sure you know what each symbol and abbreviation means. There is often information or a key in the front to explain how the catalog works. You will see descriptions such as organic seeds, full/part sun, butterfly attracting, and many more. It's important to be familiar with these symbols when you start shopping in a catalog.

A tip for all gardeners is to know what hardiness zone you are planting in. Most plants are labeled using the USDA Hardiness Zone Map. The map is based on the average annual minimum winter temperature an area receives. The Post Rock District falls into Zone 5 for the northern counties of Smith and Jewell, and Zone 6 for the southern counties. This is very important if you are shopping for a tree or shrub. They are larger investments and won't survive if planted outside of their climate zone. If you are just planting veggies you won't need to worry about this map as much, since they are annual crops meaning they won't survive our winters.

When reading the descriptions of vegetable varieties, you will often come across certain terms or vocabulary that you will need to know in order to have success in the garden. Most fruits and vegetables will be labeled by the maturity date or days to harvest. This is simply the average number of days from sowing the seeds in the garden to when you can expect to harvest the produce. Remember it's just an average range and many factors can affect it. You may also see terms such as hybrid, heirloom or open pollinated seeds. Hybrid seeds are varieties created by cross pollination of two desired parent plants. This cross produces a plant with desirable characteristics such as color, taste, or even disease resistance. You can expect to see their names written as F1, F2, or with and X. Heirloom seeds are also referred to as open pollinated. They have been passed down from generation to generation. Heirloom seeds can be saved and used again and again, creating a self-sufficient garden.

The last step is to make your shopping list and order! It's always fun to try a couple of new and unique vegetables or varieties, but remember to plant what you know your family will eat. Choose vegetables that have been through trials and tested across the state of Kansas by picking up a list of Recommended Varieties at your local Extension Office. It can be fun to talk with neighbors or community garden members about what has worked best for them and even trade favorite seeds.

This season get your garden plans started early. Take a little extra time to really understand your seed catalogs and know exactly what you will be getting when those seeds arrive for spring. If you have any questions about ordering or starting seeds, contact your local Extension Office.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at choman@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (738-3597). Find us online at www.postrock.ksu.edu