

Seed Catalogs

You know the feeling. It's the first of the year, the new seed and plant catalogs have arrived, and they are on your coffee table ready for your perusal. You sit down, pick one up, flip it open and wham, you are met with the most beautiful and lovely plants you've ever seen. But how are you going to get the full benefit of each catalog, and not be overwhelmed by the overabundance of choices and gorgeous color pictures?

Plus, is it realistic to feel you can actually grow this stuff? Of course it is, provided you get organized and have a plan.

Seed and plant catalogs will be arriving in a few weeks, so let's take a look how to get the most out of them. Follow these next steps and you will have the confidence you need to dive in, start trying new things, and add wonderful exciting new plants to your home, yard and garden.

Climate Zone

This step alone will really help you focus on what will do well in your area and what won't, and it will narrow down what you can order. Here in Villa Park we are in zone 5b. Our first Frost free day is generally May 15 and out

Before you get overwhelmed with choices, first get out a piece of paper. Jot down your climate zone. If you live in a micro-climate within your zone, then note your area's seasonal highs and lows, and your frost dates.

If you don't know your hardiness zone is, please check out the USDA zone map <http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/> or you can ask your local county extension agent for the frost dates and other seasonal benchmarks for your area. You can also find this information in publications like the Farmer's Almanac, and on many Internet Websites by searching for US Frost Free Dates.

A very general rule of thumb for seasonal benchmarks is:

- Early Spring = Soil temperature is cool, but past the last hard freeze or heavy frost. May still have light frost
- Late Spring = Soil has begun to warm, and danger of frost is past
- Early Summer = Soil temperature and night temperatures have warmed
- Late Summer = Soil and night temperatures have begun to cool, but still before first frost
- Fall = Soil temperature has cooled and light frosts occur, but before first hard freeze or heavy frost. Ground is not frozen
- Winter = Soil temperature is very cold or soil is actually frozen. Hard freezes and heavy frosts; soil may freeze

Buying Plants Vs. Seed:

Many catalogs offer seeds, bulbs, and young plants. If you just don't want to go the seed route, you can always order young plants that will arrive at the perfect time for your climate zone. All you have to do is set them out in your garden.

The following sowing information applies to any kind of seed, whether flower, vegetable, or perennial, so let's take a closer look.

Seed and Plant Temperatures

Some seeds need warm temperatures, about 70° F (21.11° C) or even warmer to germinate. Others need cool temperatures about 55° F (12.78° C) or freezing to germinate well. Young plants may prefer a different temperature to grow well than the seed did to germinate. Remember that the germination temperatures most catalogs are talking about are the soil temperatures needed to germinate the seed properly, and the climate zone indicates what the grown plant will need.

So if your soil temperatures are going to be too cold, you may want to consider sowing indoors so you have plants big enough to set out when the temperatures outside warm up. If you live in a temperate area, then you have a longer growing season and can order accordingly.

Soil Temperatures

Indoors, soil temperatures will approximate the average of day and night temperature for the location. Outdoors, soil temperatures will be slightly below this average in spring and slightly above it in fall.

Sowing

To figure out when you ought to sow, first pick out the right date for setting out seedlings in your area; meaning your frost-free dates, and then count back the number of weeks to grow garden-size transplants.

Plan to order

Sort your seed choices into groups on a piece of paper, by their germination temperature requirements, so you will know which ones can be sown together. This will help you order similar things that will do well at the same time. You will have much more success this way.

Here is an example:

Seed Type:	Transplant Season:	Transplant Date in My Area:	Number Weeks from sowing to garden size transplants:	Date to Sow:
Ageratum	Early Summer	May 1 - 15	6 to 8	March 15

Location and Plant Habit

Another important thing to keep in mind is your location and plant habit. While you are sorting by germination temperatures, you can also be sorting for your location for full sun, shade, or partial shade and by plant habit: height, width, flower color, etc.

Give some thought to the size and location of your garden sites. Whatever your choices are, it's wise to make them ahead of time. Plan for paths where you want to walk. Consider the type of plants you want, the conditions under which they thrive, and place your beds where the best combination of light, shade, moisture and drainage exists.

Choose the right plant for each location

The density and time of shade cast by existing plants and objects in your garden should be considered when you plan your plantings. So pay attention to how high and wide a plant may grow so you have enough room and light for each choice.

Some existing plants and objects may be:

Deciduous trees which permit plenty of light during the cool weather of early spring and fall, and providing mottled shade in summer;

Evergreen trees and shrubs that provide year-round shade — Their density can depend on the branching habit of the particular variety you have;

Low walls and evergreen hedges that provide a pattern of part-day shade and part-day sun, except to the south side where sun falls all day;

Buildings and high walls that provide dense shade to the north and very hot, bright conditions to the south. A building may provide protection for tender plants in winter

Where is the sun?

Remember the sun rises about 30 degrees higher in summer than in winter. Observe how light falls in your yard over the course of a year, and plan your garden area to use this to advantage in each season.

What to expect

After you have placed your order and your seeds and plants arrive in the mail, you need to take proper care of them fairly quickly. They are very vulnerable at this point.

If you have ordered seed, you need to keep them in a cool, dry area until you choose to sow them.

For young plants, keep them in a dark, cool area and try to get them planted in 24 to 48 hours.

If you have ordered houseplants or tropicals, you can put them in a pot right away, and get them watered. If you want, you can water your plants with a weak seaweed solution to help the plant normalize, but don't fertilize for at least two to three weeks; let the plants get settled first.

If you are planting straight out into the garden, wait until the afternoon. The lack of direct sun will help your plants make the transition from the packing box to the garden much easier.

Protect the young plants from direct sun for a few weeks if applicable, and water every 1-2 days until they get established. Do not fertilize for at least a two weeks.

Always Go With Quality and Reputation

Lastly, always check the guarantee of the company you are ordering from. All the quality companies have a solid guarantee and will not ship poor quality plants that won't do well.

Obviously you need to do your part and get the plants into their optimum growing conditions as soon as they arrive, but reputable seed and plant mail order businesses want you to be happy and have healthy plants, so they will stand behind their product. They want you to order again and will always be there to help you if you have questions.

Conclusion:

If you have never tried buying plants by mail order you are missing out! So many varieties and exciting plants are available that you just can't get at your local garden center, so this year, don't just look at the pictures and think, "I can't do this" because with a little bit of planning on your part, you can, and you will be happy that you tried it out!

Source: weekendgardener.net