

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: Jan. 29, 2006
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January is the perfect time to imagine and plan your garden. The bare ground and open space of your winter garden will inspire you. The descriptions in all those seed catalogs you've collected can stir your dreams of beautiful flowers and a wonderful harvest.

Begin by reviewing your past gardens. Remember what you have grown, what was successful, and what didn't quite live up to your expectations. Think about something new to try. What exactly could you do with kohlrabi? Is that sunny spot warm enough to try eggplant? Is this the year to try canning tomatoes? How many salads will your family eat?

Now, think about where your plants will come from. You can purchase seedlings from nurseries, or any number and type of stores. A wonderful place to pick up some great, healthy seedlings grown especially for this area will be the Annual Skagit County Master Gardener Plant Faire, in May. Acquiring seedlings is definitely simpler, but if you want something particular, the variety is limited.

Do you have a favorite that you must have? Do you want to try something new or unusual? Have you been disappointed by past selections? If so, you want to think seeds. You can purchase seeds from a store, but those racks can only hold so much. The selection will, necessarily, be limited. The best thing to do is to grab those catalogs. With the oodles of seed companies and their wonderful catalogs, the variety of seeds available can be mind boggling, but what better way to spend a cold winter day? You can narrow your choices of companies a bit by checking the location of their test gardens. For example, if they are located in New Mexico, you may want to choose another company. There are many regional seed companies that market specifically to our climate. A few of these are; Territorial Seed Company, Johnny's Selected Seeds, Stokes Seeds, Thompson & Morgan, Ed Hume Seeds, Pinetree Garden Seeds...the list goes on and on.

Now, on to your seed choices: Read the descriptions and make your selections based on mature plant size, growth habit, light requirements, and days to maturity. Plants requiring a long growing season will have to be started indoors. In some areas of our county, certain plants requiring a lot of heat may not grow well. A couple of terms you will come across are hybrid and open-pollinated. Hybrid seeds are from plants that were artificially pollinated by the human hand. They are bred to take the best characteristics of the parent plants, improving preferred cultural characteristics such as production, vigor, uniformity, and disease resistance. One drawback of hybrid plants is that their seeds do not produce reliably. If you save seeds from hybrid plants, you will not be able to predict what the next generation will be. Otherwise, purchased hybrid seeds can be great.

Open-pollinated seeds are sometimes called heirloom. These are the same seeds that your grandparents and great-grandparents grew. Heirloom tomatoes are especially popular. Birds, insects, the wind, or other natural mechanisms pollinate these plants. Their collected seeds will produce new generations of plants just like the parent plant.

There are other ways to buy seeds too. You can purchase seed that is coated with clay. These are called pelleted seed. This coating simply makes the seeds easier to handle. Another way you may find seeds is embedded on paper sheets or tapes. You simply unroll and cover with soil. The seeds are spaced correctly.

Whatever you choose, it is best to order your seeds early in the year. Your chosen variety may be very popular and could sell out. Seed packets contain a varying amount of seeds. Don't feel you need to use them all the year they are purchased. If stored correctly, they may last several years. Since you've ordered them early, the same storage care should be taken when your seeds arrive. To store, place in a container with a tight fitting lid. Add a few silica packages to absorb any moisture (save those little packets that come in your Christmas gifts), and then keep this container in a cool, dark spot or the back of the refrigerator.

As spring arrives, you can take out your seeds, ready to grow your garden dream.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
