

Choosing Seed

By Jason Miller

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Now's the time to buy seed for this year's garden.

January is the perfect time to imagine and plan your garden. The bare ground and open space of your planting beds can inspire you, and 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. (Last year, a seed company that shall go unnamed sent me carrot seed that performed terribly, so phooey on them.) Think about something new to try. What exactly could you do with kohlrabi? Is that sunny spot warm enough to finally give eggplant a go? 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 other store that carries them. A wonderful place to pick up some great, healthy seedlings grown especially for this area will be the Annual Skagit County Master Gardener Plant Fair on May 9 (mark your calendar now!). Acquiring seedlings is definitely simpler, but if you want something particular, the variety can be 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, consider starting your plants from seed. You can purchase seeds from a store, but those racks can only hold so much. The selection will, necessarily, be limited. For more variety, grab those abundant catalogs and check out your choices—which can be mind-boggling.

You can narrow your choices of companies 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, including Ed Hume Seeds, Territorial Seed Company, Johnny's Selected Seeds, Stokes Seeds, Thompson & Morgan, Pinetree Garden Seeds, and many more.



Many regional seed companies cater to our Pacific Northwest climate, including Ed Hume Seeds, Territorial Seed Company, Johnny's Selected Seeds and Pinetree Garden Seeds. Concrete Master Gardener Jason Miller reports reliable germination rates with all three.

Photo by Jason Miller.

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. (That last one bears repeating: days to maturity. Trust me.) Plants requiring a long growing season will have to be started indoors—look for our article on seed-starting techniques in the March 6 *Herald*. In some areas of our county, certain plants requiring a lot of heat may not grow well.

While perusing catalogs, a couple of terms you may come across are “hybrid” and “open-pollinated.” Hybrid seeds are from plants that were artificially pollinated by 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, however, is that their seeds do not reproduce reliably; i.e., if you save and replant seeds from hybrid plants, you will not be able to predict what the next generation will be (you’ll get either of the two parent plants used to create the hybrid, not a plant identical to the original hybrid). Aside from this wrinkle, purchased hybrid seeds can be a great choice.

Open-pollinated seeds are sometimes called “heirloom.” These are descendants of the same seeds that your grandparents and great-grandparents grew. Heirloom tomatoes are popular, especially at my house, where the ‘Brandywine’ tomato is king. Birds, insects, wind currents 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 pelleted seed, which is coated with clay to make it easier to handle. You also may find seeds embedded on paper sheets or lengths of tape, spaced correctly so that you don’t have to. You simply unroll the paper or tape, cover it with soil and water it in.

Whatever you choose, it’s a good idea to order your seeds early in the year. Your chosen variety may be very popular and could sell out. I learned this the hard way once, when I ordered a sought-after variety of alpine strawberry seeds and found my favorite vendor’s supply was completely gone.

Seed packets contain a varying amount of seeds. Don’t feel you need to use them all the year they are purchased. If stored properly, 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 seed packets in a container with a tight-fitting lid. Add a few silica packets to absorb moisture (did you save the packets that came in your Christmas gifts?), and then keep the container in a cool, dark spot or the back of the refrigerator.

When spring arrives, you can take out your seeds and get ready to grow your dream garden.

How long will it last?

Storing your seeds in a cool, dry, dark place will extend their period of viability or their ability to germinate. How long that period of viability will last depends on the seed variety; here are some general periods for common vegetables:

Type of seed	Relative longevity (years)
Cucumber	5
Lettuce	5
Beets	4
Cauliflower	4
Pumpkin	4
Radish	4
Tomato	4
Beans	3
Carrot	3
Pea	3
Onion	1
Spinach	1

Source: <http://growingtaste.com>