

## New and Improved?

It is perfectly understandable that a brand new year demands both new products and new ways of doing the same old thing. As I have waded through the flood of garden catalogs for many Januarys, I admit to a degree of skepticism about the improvement promised. I would be pleased to be wrong.

We may be, as Thomas Jefferson says on my refrigerator magnet, “But tho’ an old man I am but a young gardener.” But we are not so young that we are not aware that the purple prose promising the best garden ever is designed not merely to enhance our small Edens, but to enhance the messenger’s bottom line. And indeed we hope they are successful!

Catalogs, because they are designed for wide geographical distribution, are general in their recommendations. What may be a splendid plant for one area may not grow well here: even a plant that does well in Piedmont Virginia may be a disappointment in Tidewater. This is where a conversation with your neighbor will be helpful in shortening your wish list, as you collect valuable tips about which varieties have flourished on your street.

One noticeable thing in catalogs is the increased availability of grafted tomato plants. These plants have moved from ‘experimental’ to accepted norm. Improved vigor and disease resistance have resulted from this technique. Those plant nurseries that have kept records, report a 40% to 50% larger yield. Their being less susceptible to heat, cold, and drought stress is an additional incentive to try them.

Home gardeners with experience in growing their own plants may delight in growing a sturdy variety for root stock and then grafting a particularly desired hybrid to it to achieve a dream plant! To facilitate this process, one catalog, [www.naturalgardening.com](http://www.naturalgardening.com) features silicone grafting clips. The directions, “How to Graft Tomatoes” is on their web site. As this technique for avoiding the ailments peculiar to tomatoes becomes more widely used, I suspect we will soon be growing other vegetable plants grafted to sturdy roots. The use of grafts in raising fruit was familiar to Roman gardeners so you can ascribe it to the march of time.

Another item seen in more and more catalogs is various hoops covered in translucent materials designed to trap warmth and sunlight and eliminate cold, wind and critters large and small. The hoops can be anchored with specially made devices or you can secure them with those heavy hunks that clutter up your junk drawer or even bags of sand or gravel.

One of the purposes of these hoops is to extend the growing season at both ends. He who harvests crops for Christmas dinner wins! These aids are also a beginning gardener’s introduction to the possibilities and potential of a proper greenhouse. Another trend that has become firmly established is that of raised beds. One good friend/good gardener in Mathews has had a bountiful harvest from raised beds. Equally impressive is the amount of water channeled from a roof-rich century old house that fills a tank to overflowing, a treat to thirsty vegetables.

The catalogs abound in the materials needed to build beds of every shape and size in all kinds of wood, plastic or metal. There are plain raised beds, even ‘designer’ raised beds sufficiently elegant for a patio. You may think this a rather extravagant use/misuse of your family budget but when cucumbers are priced by the piece not the pound it may be time to take vegetable gardening \$\$\$eriously.

A REMINDER; For information on this year’s ‘Grasses for the Masses’ program, call Bill Walker (804) 6936540 or email [wcwalker@inna.net](mailto:wcwalker@inna.net). The workshop in Gloucester County will be Saturday, February 1 from 9:30-11:30 A.M. at Whitcomb Lodge, Beaverdam Park, 8687 Roaring

Springs Road. Volunteers in this program grow wild celery underwater grass to improve the health of the Chesapeake Bay.

16 Jan 14