

## What is Really New Amid the New?

It puzzles me that I order irregularly from only two or three catalogs, but I am swamped by 27 big beautiful ones with glorious photography and with frantic messages to order now and save 10% or \$5.00 or whatever. If there is a constant among the messages it is their emphasis on the “new”. That of course makes us wonder if “new” has become the new “better?”

Much as I deplore all the waste of paper/trees I save a lot of them for the information they contain. For example, I don't order from White Flower Farm but the catalog is not only informative but has ideas for combining plants and splendid choices for containers and house plants. They offer a new Calycanthus (sweetshrub) ‘Venus’, a hybrid between three species of Calycanthus with glossy leaves and a five inch magnolia-like flower – elegant.

Many of this early flock of catalogs feature seeds. I do admit to a weakness for seeds, but only if they come in small numbers, 10 to 30, otherwise I'd have them lurking in the back of the fridge for years, crowding the collection already there. I spend hours reading about vegetables – pure nostalgia. With words like sweet corn's ‘Gotta Have It’ and slug repellent ‘Escar-go’ you must admit catalogs are fun to read.

Vegetables grow so well here and for prime eating what can be tastier and healthier? If you are showered with catalogs, check out the shift to earth friendly products and practices. Some companies are totally organic, even carbon-neutral, such as Seeds of Change, which has been organic for 20 years. Their new focus is on urban and container plants for small spaces.

The Cook's Garden catalog is especially delicious: they have recipes! They also have great greens. When I had vegetables we grew chard rather than spinach because it lasted longer without bolting in our heat. Cook's Garden has a chard called ‘Virgo’ a good substitute for bok choy or celery in stir fry dishes. Johnny's Selected Seeds also has over 250 organic varieties and I was delighted to see dandelions! They are not the ones you plucked out of the front lawn for greens or wine making. This, a different plant called Italian Dandelion, *Chicorium intybus*, tastes and looks a lot like the familiar weed. Grown like lettuce, these salad stars have a tang with underlying sweetness.

Cilantro, the herb whose leaves appear in quantities of new recipes for soup and other dishes and whose seeds are coriander, is one of many herbs worth a try. New and curious is a cranberry for which you do not need a bog. Sold as four year old vines, these plants are a ground cover which will eventually produce lots of berries and remain pretty all year round. Perennial in our zone 7, they are a source of Vitamin C. However, to do well they do require an acid soil rich with peat and sand.

For neighborhood gardeners, beauty and a feast sometimes seem difficult to achieve on the same plot, but if you want both lovely plants and wonderful food, check out Virginia's Edible Landscaping. Located in Afton this nursery can be found on [www.ediblelandscaping.com](http://www.ediblelandscaping.com). Your appetite can never become jaded if you have cherries, persimmons, and pomegranates as well as citrus and small fruits.

For more choices of plant material that do well in our zone 7, consult Niche Gardens. Their catalog is plain vanilla and good for all of 2008 but their website will be updated throughout the year. Located in Chapel Hill, N.C. they specialize in hard to find versions of our Southeastern native plants. As a small nursery their plants are ‘handgrown’ and shipped with care in old newspapers not those fly-away plastic peanuts.

If you have been searching for the native Yellowwood tree, *Cladrastus kentukea*, Niche has it. Chosen in 1994 as Gold Medal Winner by the Pa. Horticultural Society, it is a native deciduous tree with a large spreading crown up to 50' tall. It is named for the yellow heartwood once used as a dye. As a legume, it has panicles of white pea-like flowers in May.

Other rarely seen natives in the Niche catalog are *Cyrilla racemiflora* and Yellow Buckeye, *Aesculus flava*. The *Cyrilla* is called Swamp Titi or Leatherwood and is really a large shrub which can be trained into a tree. Native to Virginia's coastal plain, it has fragrant white flowers from late spring to summer. As a tree is evidence of long-term planning, planting one may be a good way to start the new year.