

WEEDING OUT SEED CATALOGS

You know it is January, not by the weather, but when your mailbox bulges with seed catalogs. I have 12, which is at least eight more than I want and probably 11 more than I need. Although I love looking through them, only a few are “keepers.” Only a few earn the space they require! They are an irresistible sign of spring. There is something magical about a seed packet, so much promise in such a small container. And the price is right!

New to me is the Maine Potato Catalog from Wood Prairie Farm. Not just organic potatoes but maple syrup and whole grain bread and pancake mixes. It has organic seed potatoes of every color, shape and size. ‘What does tempt me is whole wheat flour with sufficient gluten so that it rises without the addition of white flour.

Another specialty catalog is “Totally Tomatoes” which sells packets of 20 or 30 seeds for as little as \$1. Some of the packets have 100 seeds of course but if you want to experiment with a new variety, fewer is better. Peppers and other salad essentials are listed but the list of tomatoes is formidable. The names alone will amuse you: Green Zebra, Health Kirk, Dinner Plate, German Head, Anna Russian...these are tomatoes?

They also feature a new Mexican Sour Gherkin, a mini cucumber that tastes as if it has already been picked? It does make you wonder if this could be a response to market demand!

A company with many options is the Territorial Seed Company. Not just organic and conventional seed but seeds and seedlings are available. This catalog gives a lot of information so you know which varieties are most likely to succeed in your own soil and climate. Territorial sells flower seeds as well including mixes of many kinds from “Deer Resistant Mix” to “Beneficial Bug Mix,” as well as the expected wildflower and regional selections.

Since hellebore takes two years to flower from seed, they offer plants as well. The 15 seeds are \$4.50 and the one plant is \$5.30. Decisions, decisions. Reading the “Seeds of Change” catalog-not just a catalog, a lifestyle-will make you want to retire to a cabin in the woods adjacent to a big sunny field. Not hug-a-tree organic but university-learned organic, these techniques and products make you want a healthier, more beautiful home place.

As well as a bounty of vegetables and flowers, Seeds of Change offers “Squeeze Pots” made of recycled rubber and plastic which look like terracotta but are flexible, even bounce-able. They survive both summer heat and winter freezing.

CABBAGES AND KINGS

Winter is prime time for pruning trees. If your tree is getting too tall for the site, lateral limbs can be cut back to where they join a larger secondary branch, which will then become the leader at a lower height. Arborists at Virginia Tech warn us about the damage “topping” does to trees. The power companies do this to those trees which were unfortunate enough to have been planted under their lines. But there is no reason for the rest of us to top trees.

Unlike a really bad haircut which time will cure, topping affects the way the tree grows. It responds to the indiscriminate lopping off at one level (topping) by growing ugly “witches’ brooms.” These water sprouts grow just below the cut and disfigure the tree.

Winter is a good time to prune shrubs as well. Some trimming back is usually done after blooming but it is easier to reshape the leafless ones in the winter when you can really see what you are doing. They can be thinned by eliminating the oldest canes at ground level. Do not remove more than a third of the canes in one year. Long branches can be trimmed back and crossing, touching, diseased and dead limbs, cut out close to where they emerge from a branch.