

CATALOG ANYONE?

Marianne Willburn, Frederick County Master Gardener

Annus Horibilis in the garden was just wrapping up last year when I opened my mailbox to find cheerful booklets of cleverly packaged fantasy fiction (read: seed catalogs) rubbing shoulders with perfectly respectable bills. After the season I had just endured, seeing those two pound tomatoes, heirloom peppers in the prime of their lives and sun-dappled babies balanced on monster pumpkins didn't exactly put a smile on my face. It just made me hopping mad.

Thankfully, there are catalog companies out there with enough taste to respect a decent period of mourning before bombarding your average home gardener with dreams of a new season. Their colorful offerings have been better received, and now take up precious space on my kitchen table. These beauties, along with a black cup of coffee and a Sharpie marker are all I need in deepest winter to start my day well. I'm not saying that the kitchen doesn't occasionally ring with the hollow, bitter laugh of experience, but lately and for the most part, there is more oohing and ahing going on than mumbling and groaning.

Ready or not, it's time to throw off the memories of last season and start fresh. Fresh projects, fresh ideas, and hopefully a new round of fresh seeds and/or plants to inspire and motivate us toward brighter days this spring. Gardening catalogs are the first step in accessing that motivation. Sunlight is pouring out of some of these booklets, opening our eyes to new varieties, new methods of propagation, and one or two gadgets guaranteed to make our lives in the garden access the sublime, however briefly.

If you've been on this gardening adventure long enough, you probably understand what to look for by now. You instinctively know that when a catalog offers ten lavenders for a penny or a fifteen foot perennial garden for \$9.99, there is something rotten in Denmark. Free lunches don't exist in horticultural circles any more than they do in other spheres of our lives, and although you certainly don't have to pay top dollar for catalog plants and seeds, you may be shorting yourself if "bottom dollar" and "pretty picture" are your main criteria when browsing.

Not all catalogs are created equal. Some are intended for gardeners sure of what they want, and who are happy to scan a black and white list of Latin monikers for name, rank, and serial number. Some appeal to our desire to garden organically, and make doing so seem effortless and rustically appealing. Some appeal to our frugality, others to our profligacy. My particular favorites right now are the heirloom variety catalogs whose

authors have scoured hill and dale to introduce flavorful, colorful and traditional varieties to our modern lives - allowing me a garden I could have comfortably discussed with my great-grandmother over that black cup of coffee I was talking about earlier.

A couple words of advice however. If you are buying seeds this winter, don't assume that last year's bright-eyed babies are last year's news. As long as you've kept them cool and dry over the season, you may be able to invest precious recession dollars into some other must-have variety. My mother just grew a tomato from a packet she bought when I was two – and it's been more than a few years since I needed potty-training.

Whatever delicious catalogs you choose to peruse this winter, do yourself a favor and don't procrastinate. Putting your order in early means that you have them on hand when you are ready – and that's not always when you think it might be.

It never is at my house.

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit www.frederick.umd.edu/mg or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, (301) 600-1596. University of Maryland Extension programs are open to all citizens without regard to race, color, gender, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation, marital or parental status, or national origin.