

## Know Before You Purchase from Mail Order Catalogs

It is the time of year again when plant mail order catalogs begin to appear. I always enjoy looking through them to see what new products and varieties are available. It also gives me spring fever.

As I look through the various catalogs, I realize that a person could have many questions about the information given and statements made by the companies. For example, something often noted is "USDA cold hardiness zone." What does cold hardiness mean? In the simplest terms, the USDA has defined standardized zones, ranging from 1 to 11, for all areas in the United States as an aid to determine if a plant will survive in that area. Cache Valley is generally a zone 4 or 5. Zone 4 means that an average minimum temperature is between 20 and 30 degrees below zero, and the average minimum temperature for zone 5 is between 10 and 20 degrees below zero. Lower zone numbers indicate colder areas. I have noticed that some catalogs list hardiness zones for an area that are higher than they actually are. It is also common for catalogs to state that a plant is more cold hardy than it actually is. A plant that I commonly see this with is Crape Myrtle (a shrub or tree popular in warmer areas that has a long bloom season and very ornamental bark). Some varieties of this plant are commonly listed as being hardy to either zone 5 or 6. However, when they are planted locally, they are regularly killed back to the ground by the cold.

Also be aware of claims pertaining to how well a plant grows. Statements such as, "Survives almost anywhere," could be interpreted as, "You will never be able to get rid of this plant once you place it in your yard." Another claim commonly seen in tree descriptions highlights how wonderfully fast a species may grow. If you read, "Grows at least 10 feet a year; provides instant shade," be very cautious. This statement may be more properly worded, "This tree will grow fast but die quickly due to insect pests and diseases, and it may cost you several thousand dollars to remove."

A final issue not generally listed in catalogs is soil requirements of plants. Plants such as rhododendrons, azaleas, dogwood trees, silver maples, red maples and blueberries do not perform well in Intermountain West soils, even though they are among the most popular ordered.

As with anything, it is always wise to use caution if you do not know exactly what you are ordering. I recommend using reference books to find more information about particular species. USU Extension has many publications and resources relating to proper plant selection. Local, experienced nursery personnel can also be a helpful resource.