

Ordering from Catalogs

The new year is almost upon us and plant catalogs will start arriving in our mail boxes appealing to our desire to be able to again enjoy our time outdoors in warmer weather. There are many beautiful and useful plants sold in these catalogs that we can enjoy in our yards. I personally enjoy leafing through them and am sometimes amazed at the variety available. Also, a major advantage to ordering from these catalogs is that they are often times a good source of antique/heritage plants and hard to find varieties of vegetables and fruit trees that are sometimes unavailable at local garden centers.

Those who order from catalogs, though, should be aware that some plants sold in them may not be completely cold hardy in Cache Valley. These companies are also sometimes rather inventive when describing positive plant characteristics. For example, I have seen several advertise “blue roses,” and the picture of the rose in the catalog is relatively blue. In reality, a truly blue rose does not exist and the color of the rose, when planted in the garden, is closer to lilac-purple with maybe some hints of blue in it.

Another area that those interested in ordering from catalogs should be cautious of is purchasing supposed “miracle plants.” Some that I have seen include trees that will grow “at least ten feet a year,” or shrubs that form a “fully grown hedge” in a single growing season. These “miracle plants” are usually one of three or four different species including cottonwood, willow or elm, and are often given new, imaginative names so that you think they are exclusive to that particular company. They will grow very quickly as stated, but also include a whole other set of issues, in that they have the ability to heave sidewalks, penetrate plumbing and crack foundations when planted too closely to the house. These trees are also often messy by dropping profuse amounts of seed or dead branches in the yard and disease prone. The “miracle hedges” are often actually trees that require abundant amounts of pruning to keep their size where it is needed. When these trees are left un-pruned for any amount of time, they show their true nature and greatly outgrow the area they were planted.

A guideline to follow when ordering one of these “miracle plants” is when you are unfamiliar with the species, see if the company has included the scientific or Latin name in the advertisement. This name is absolute and enables you to perform further research in reference books or on the internet. Reputable catalogs include the Latin name, and if not included, pass on ordering the plant.

Another plant often sold in gardening catalogs to be cautious of is called Star-of-Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbellatum*). It has pretty white spring flowers, and is planted as a bulb. Unfortunately it is nearly impossible to eliminate from the yard and will spread rapidly.

Be aware that many plants sold by mail-order establishments are often shipped “bare-root.” This means that all soil has been washed from the root system. These plants should be planted while they are still dormant in late winter or early spring. If they have already formed new leaves upon arrival, it is more difficult to get them to survive in the landscape. Be sure that the company you order from is able to ship bare-root plants in a timely manner.

With these facts in mind, enjoy your time spent browsing gardening catalogs and do not fear ordering from them. I will most likely do so and anxiously await the day it is warm enough to get into the yard and plant my new plants.

Master Gardener classes will be starting February 7, and are a wonderful way to brush up on horticultural knowledge and be a part of a great volunteer organization. The Master Gardeners and the Utah Native Plant Society are also sponsoring a low-cost and fun, native plant propagation workshop. Sessions will be held on March 13 and March 15. For information on either, please call USU/Cache County Extension at (435)752-6263.