

With Catalogs, Come Ideas!

We surely do live in an information age! Centuries ago, with a passion to find both plants and knowledge about them, scores of intrepid hunters sailed the seas for months and years hoping to bring back new and unusual specimens. For example, in the 18th century Joseph Banks circled the globe with Capt. Cook exploring for plants and in the Victorian age, gentlewoman Marianne North visited nearly every continent to paint the plants indigenous to every part of the world. Although not a trained botanist, she had a keen eye for detail and her oil paintings were a valuable aid in identifying exotic species.

Today, all we have to do to see plants from all over the world is to wait for the avalanche of catalogs that herald the next year. And if by some miracle your name and address escaped the survey that directs this flow of free flora-utopia there is the internet.

Before the holidays the catalogs seem to concentrate on plants useful as gifts, full grown and grandly packaged. Once winter has settled in, the focus will shift to seeds, annuals, perennials, shrubs, even trees. Some companies are generalists and include everything horticultural from seeds to supplies. Others concentrate on a narrow range although one of 'just' tomatoes may have other vegetables and the Bluestone catalog has expanded over the decades from small '3 for' perennials to shrubs and small trees. There are catalogs where the emphasis is on new, newer, newest and there are catalogs featuring heirloom varieties of cherished plants.

The word 'new' has taken on the connotation of 'better'. We all enjoy a new recipe, new moon, new book, new baby, new friend. They are not always better than earlier versions of that list. Another conundrum is 'new and improved.' Everything can surely be improved one way or another, but there is no essential connection between newness and improvement. Think of your first toaster and the dozen you've had since?

Often the search for 'new' is a search for something strange, rare, exciting, weird. We itch to upset the applecart: it is great fun to pull out the tried and true and experiment. After a while everyone will have planted Euphorbia 'Tasmanian Tiger' and you will be the avant-gardener with Shasta daisies.

Over the years plant photography has become more beautiful, a mixed blessing. Some presentations are so lush that anything grown during a hot, humid, Tidewater summer will look a poor relation indeed. Actually I love a catalog with line drawings in black and white. It helps to understand the structure and the relationship of flower to plant. Your imagination can add the color.

About price: Small packs of inexpensive plants are for truly good gardeners, defined in this case as those persons who will plant, water, feed and PAY ATTENTION! The rest of us will have more success with a larger and therefore more costly plant that has the experience and the root system to adjust to our good intentions and erratic follow through.

Prices that are too good, i.e. cheap, to be true are usually a waste of good money. A plant poorly grown so it can be sold cheaply will not suddenly thrive in your garden. Just as you ease a plant out of its pot at the garden center to check its roots, you have to judge a catalog plant by the honesty shown in describing the care, use, climate and soil suitability, sun and shade. Buy cautiously. Some plant purveyors have been heavily influenced by P.T.Barnum.

On the other hand some buyers have become so enamored of a particular plant, they have done the research and know exactly what they want. There was a time when a rare orchid could cost as much as a car. Even today an expensive plant, a tree for instance, may be a good investment for the value it adds to your property.

CLOSE TO HOME The American Farmland Trust that works to protect and improve the nation's working lands publishes a magazine three times a year. Their fall issue has the results of the contest to find America's favorite farmers markets and the Williamsburg Farmers Market was the winner in the medium sized market division. Sprinkled among the top twenty in the small, medium, large categories were four other Virginia markets: the small Smart Markets at Mason, Fairfax, and Virginia Beach; the medium Historic Roanoke City Market, and Goochland Farmers Market.

Only California with seven had more than Virginia and most states had one or two winners and only New York and Pennsylvania came close with four each. Good for us!