

A Key Change In Seed Catalogs

By Marie Woodward

Every year, it's always the same. The holidays are over, the decorations put away, and at last you have time for the seed catalogs that have made their annual trek to your mailbox. Every gardener – seasoned or newbie – loves sitting down at a table with a cup of coffee, spreading those little beauties out, and creating a wish list for the coming growing season. Flipping through the perfect pictures of flowers, vegetables and trees can make any gardener giddy with excitement.

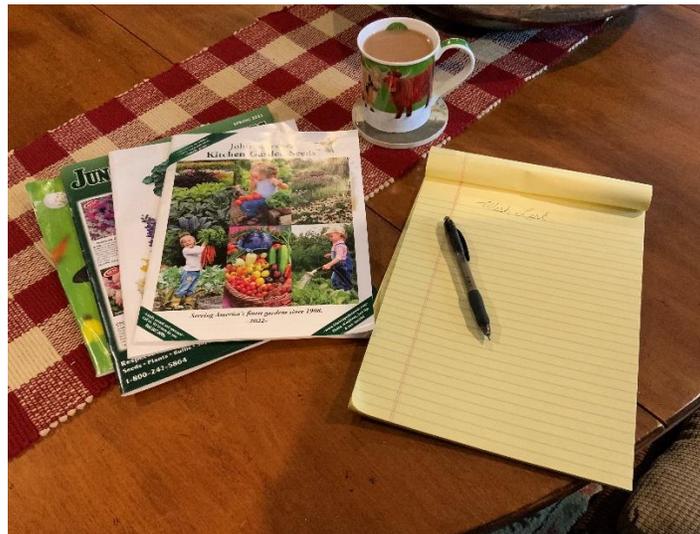


Photo by Marie Woodward

When looking through your cache of catalogs this year, you may notice something different. Many seed catalogs are not as thick as they once were, and inside, they may not contain as many reference guides, either. A check with several seed and plant companies to find out what's going on reveals that many are now using their printed catalogs to sell the gardening “sizzle” while relying on their websites to provide comprehensive planting and growing information.

Andrew, a customer service representative from Prairie Moon Nursery of Winona, Minnesota, explained they only have limited space in their catalogs. So, they are encouraging catalog

customers to also come to their website, where they try to provide all the information anyone could want or need, including reference keys to help gardeners rapidly identify each plant's growing needs and characteristics.

Some companies, such as Select Seeds of Union, Connecticut are still including reference keys with their sales catalog offerings.

But, this practice seems to be fading, as the catalog spaces formerly occupied by reference keys are being replaced with QR codes that take tech-savvy gardeners to websites that offer comprehensive information and a larger selection of plants. The David Austin English Rose Collection (West Tyler, Texas) catalog for 2022 is another example of the evolving catalog. It's lovely photos are accompanied by QR codes throughout that allow readers to take a deep dive and learn more about many selections.



QR codes from Roots & Rhizomes. Photo by Marie Woodward

No doubt, the catalog company websites are bigger, better, and more comprehensive than catalogs alone. And many of them also offer helpful video tutorials on all things garden related. Web-facing seed companies also now invite gardeners to use social media too, to stay up-to-date on inventory and special events.

Is the computerization of the seed catalog a bad thing? Well, it depends. Most gardeners have smart phones and computers, which allow an easy transition to a more digital experience. Still, there are some gardeners who do not have the technological skills or the interest to use such devices, which can limit their choices in seed and plant selection. But fear not, ye technology averse! All is not lost!

There are catalogs that will never transfer to digital. Susan, at Johnny's Select Seeds of Winslow, Maine, said they have a large Amish clientele, so going digital exclusively is definitely not in their future. Their 243-page catalog offers literally thousands of plants and comes with an easy to read key on every page. That said, they also have a great website for those who prefer a digital shopping experience. Burpee, too, has not decreased their catalog size in two years, though they now include QR codes to guide customers to more varieties and additional information on their website.

At the other end of the spectrum is Stark Brothers, of Louisiana, Missouri, best known for fruit trees, which decided a few years ago to go entirely paperless because their inventory moves so quickly they need to keep it updated daily. Asked if this affected the senior gardener clientele, Jennifer, a Stark Brothers representative, said they get around that by helping technology-averse gardeners via phone calls. She also reported that many seniors use their grandchildren to help them navigate the Stark Brothers website.

In general, seed catalogs will not go the way of the dinosaur or horse drawn carriage, but like anything that evolves, this trend will continue: Hard copy catalogs will become more focused on marketing – providing “eye candy” and inspiration for all things gardening, while the seed companies’ websites will be the go-to source for the nuts and bolts of growing plants successfully.

With that in mind, sit back, pour that second cup of joe, get that pen and paper ready, open those catalogs and Think Spring! For questions about seed selection or for other gardening questions, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center (toll-free) at (877) 486-6271, visit www.ladybug.uconn.edu, or get in touch with your local Cooperative Extension Center.