

Armchair Gardening

by *Layne G.*

Rutgers Master Gardener of Hunterdon County

It is seed catalog time! Beginning in the New Year, every gardener looks forward to opening their mailbox to find a plethora of catalogs. February is the start of “armchair gardening” for those of us who are anxiously awaiting spring so we can start digging in our gardens again.

The volume of catalogs received may be daunting but even more so are some of the words and terms that may be unfamiliar, especially to the new gardener. In this post we hope to define some of those terms to assist in making wise choices when ordering.

Plant name: Catalogues organize plants in a variety of ways but generally grouped by their type (vegetables, annuals, perennials, herbs, etc.). Within those groups, the plant name is listed alphabetically by genus, species and variety. A cultivar means a cultivated variety and the terms are used interchangeably. For example, *Echinacea* (genus), *Coneflower* (species), and Delicious Candy (variety or cultivar).

Annual, Biennial, Perennial: Annual plants grow for only a single season and then die. Biennial plants grow for two seasons. Perennial plants live year after year. Tender perennials are susceptible to frost and are grown as annuals.

Plant description: Describes size, shape, color, flowers, uses, etc. and other unique information about the plant.

Growing requirements / conditions: Catalogues provide a variety of information depending on the type of plant or seeds – some more than others. This is where we’ll find plant spacing, height of grown plant, soil requirements, sun/shade requirements, moisture requirements, drought and heat resistance, pollinators and deer/rabbit resistance. Some catalogues use cartoons or symbols to designate these properties, such as the following examples for full sun, part sun, arid environments, deer resistant, attracts hummingbirds, pollinators, etc.

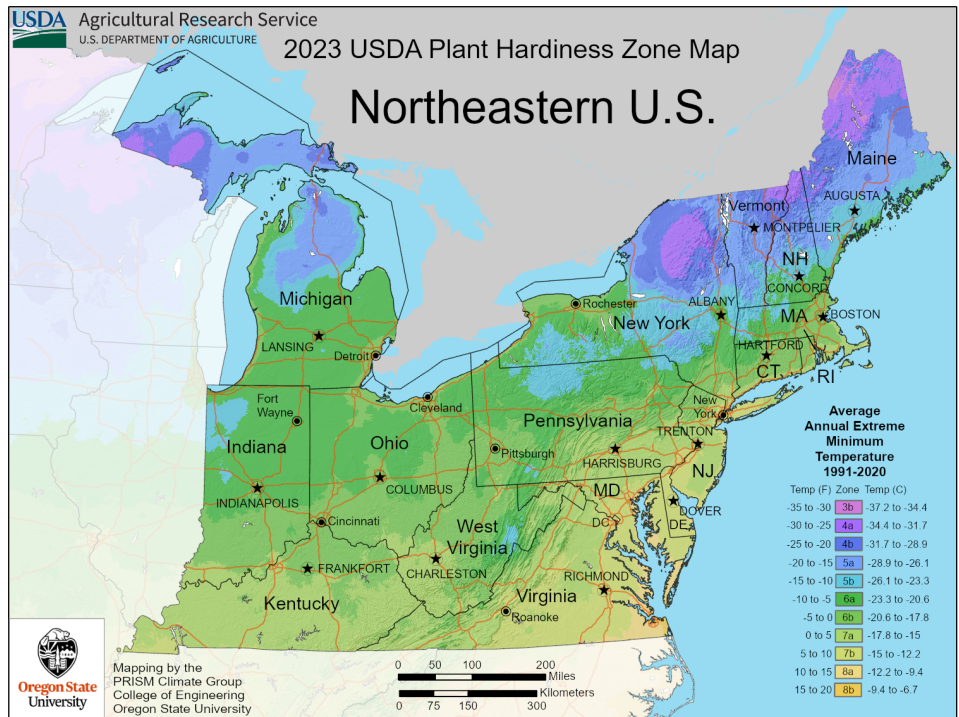


Peter Henderson & Co. Mid-Summer Catalog, 1899.
New Jersey Trade Catalogs Collection, Special Collections
and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.



Hardiness Zone: Zones designating areas the plants will withstand the minimum temperatures at a specific location.

“The USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map sets the standard by which home gardeners can determine which plants are likely to thrive in a certain location. The map divides the country into 11 hardiness zones based on the average minimum winter temperature.”



Frost date: The average date for a light freeze or frost (29°F to 32°F) in a given location.

Days to germinate: The number of days it takes for a seed to sprout.

Days to maturity or days to harvest for seeds: The number of days it takes for a sprouted seed to grow to maturity / harvest.

Days to maturity or days to harvest for transplants and those started indoors: The number of days from the time the plant is placed in the ground to the time it produces flowers or fruit.

Note: Days to germinate / harvest depends on growing conditions, hardiness zones and weather. It is meant as a guideline to determine if there is enough time to grow a plant and bring it to harvest before frost.

Early, midseason, late season: These terms are sometimes used instead of “maturity.” They refer to approximate harvest times during the growing season.

Germination rate: The rate, as a percentage, is an estimate of the ability of seeds in a typical packet to sprout and survive. Also called **Viability**.

Bare root: Nurseries often ship trees, shrubs and perennials as bare root. The plants are grown at the nursery then at the appropriate time dug up, roots washed of soil and wrapped for shipping. Bare root plants are often less expensive to buy than those in containers.

Open-pollinated seeds: Seeds collected from plants that were pollinated from natural sources i.e., insects, birds, wind, etc. Plants grown from open-pollinated seeds remain true to type. That is, they exhibit the same traits as their parent plant.

Heirloom: An open-pollinated seed variety (or plant from said seed) that has been passed down for at least 50 years. All heirloom seeds are open-pollinated but not all open-pollinated seeds are heirloom.



Hybrid seeds: Seeds that are the result of cross-pollinating two varieties of the same species of plant. This is done to produce desirable traits in a plant, such size, shape, color, yield or disease resistance. For example, seedless watermelons, larger flowers or resistance to bolting. Hybrid seeds are

typically unstable and should not be saved since successive generations may not be true to the parent.

F1: This designation indicates the first generation of a hybrid seed. F1 seeds should be purchased every year to grow the same plant again.

AAS: A variety of seed that won an All American Selections award for outstanding performance in the garden.

Bolting: The process called bolting is when lettuce, spinach and other cool-weather crops quickly flower and go to seed in hot weather. Bolting usually causes the produce to become bitter. Look for cultivars that are resistant to bolting.

Determinate and indeterminate: These terms refer to the growth habit of tomatoes. Determinate tomatoes have a compact, bush-like growth habit, reaching a maximum height of about 4 feet with no staking required. Most of the fruit matures in one month. Indeterminate tomatoes grow continuously and produce fruit through the whole season until frost. They can grow to 10 feet, require staking and may benefit from pruning.

Treated seeds: Treated seeds have been coated with fungicides, antimicrobial chemicals or insecticides to minimize problems from disease and insects. The coating is visible on the seed to indicate the treatment.

Organic seeds/crops (OG): Seeds from plants, and plants, grown without the use of synthetic pesticides or other chemicals. To be certified organic, suppliers must meet standards issued by the government or certifying body. Sustainable, chemical free, or pesticide free are terms used for seeds from small farms that are not certified nor regulated but still adhere to their own organic principles.

Pelleted Seeds: Tiny, irregularly shaped seeds that are coated with inert clay or other similar material to make them easier to plant. The coating may also include a fungicide.

Direct Seed or Direct sow: Seeds that should be directly planted in the garden due to long taproots or sensitivity to transplant shock.

Transplant: A seedling plant that has been started in a small pot or tray and grown until sturdy enough to move to the garden when weather permits.

Disease resistance codes: Most hybrids have been bred to resist diseases that are common to that specific variety. Some catalogs use abbreviations or codes to indicate to which disease the plant is resistant. Some examples include: A=Anthracnose; B=Bacterial Wilt; BB=Bacterial Blight; BBS=Bacterial Leaf spot; LB=Late Blight; R=Common Rust; S=Scab; V= Verticillium Wilt; W=Common Wilt; WR=White Rust

Do not be over whelmed with the terminology. Enjoy reading your catalogs. But remember, our eyes are bigger than our stomachs, as the saying goes, when we're "armchair gardening". Start small and order what is appropriate for your size garden and temperature zone. Most importantly have fun!

