

Introduction to Mail Order Gardening

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For many of you who already order plants, seeds and/or tools through the mail, this will be preaching to the converted! And for the rest of you, there is much to be gained from having plants and tools delivered right to your door; so please read on for some useful ideas to consider.

Certainly there is a wide range of plants and bulbs available at local garden centers thanks to the likes of Monrovia and Proven Winners. And there are often bargains to be had at Home Depot, Lowe's, or Wal-Mart if you keep an eye on the quality of what you buy. However, nothing matches the huge variety and superior quality of plants and bulbs that can be found on-line or in catalogs. The same is true for unusual seeds, hard-to-find garden tools, useful garden supplies, and garden ornaments. Perhaps even more important than variety is the outstanding customer service and expert information that you will receive from the person on the other end of the phone. Many have 24-hour coverage of their phones, but you will get the most expertise during regular business hours.

Let's talk about plants and bulbs first. There are mail order companies that exclusively focus on every type that you could possibly want. Other companies try to serve the broadest market possible. Their catalogs and web sites often have gorgeous pictures of plants with lots of related information, but they are also likely to provide only the botanical names and assume that their customers know what they want!

Some suggested resources that I have used and like are: Antonelli Brothers - begonias; Brent and Becky's - bulbs; Bluestone Perennials - smaller plants at great prices; Colorblends - bulb mixtures; David Austin Roses; Dutch Gardens - bulbs; Lilypons - water garden plants; Logees - houseplants; Moss Acres - moss; Stark Brothers - fruit and berry plants and trees; Stokes Tropicals; Swan Island Dahlias; White Flower Farm - larger but pricier plants; and Woodlanders Nursery - natives of the Piedmont region of NC. Many of these companies sell garden tools and supplies that complement their offerings, so look for that too. Google them to get contact information.

You can find racks of garden seeds in every retail garden store. Some offer a pretty good selection, but you can find whatever you are looking for (and lots more that you will discover that you want) on the web or in catalogs. Whether your taste runs to flower gardening or vegetables, organic or traditional, or to the newest or the oldest, you can find a resource. Burpee and Park Seed are two of the biggest and they cover the gamut from vegetable, herb, and flower seeds to live plants.

They sell all sorts of garden supplies and have lots of great information on their web sites. Every year they introduce new varieties and I have found some to be great and others just so-so. Other resources that I especially like for our area are: Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, Dixondale Farms, D. Landreth Seeds, Johnny's Selected Seeds, Renee's Garden, and Wood Prairie Nursery.

Good quality garden tools and supplies can be found in retail stores but they are geared to serve average homeowners who are planting annuals and cutting their lawns. It is impossible for garden centers to carry every possible product that an experienced gardener will want. What if you are developing an interest in bonsai, or want to propagate your neighbor's gorgeous heirloom rose? With careful shopping you can often get better prices online and you can surely find a solution that will serve whatever your needs may be. Some great resources are A.M. Leonard, Charley's Greenhouse, CobraHead (my favorite garden tool), Earthbox (self-watering containers), Gardener's Supply, Lee Valley, and Mantis.

So how do you locate a specific plant or type of seed that you are looking for? One of the best resources is Dave's Garden at www.davesgarden.com. It is free to register and their Plant Scout is fabulous. They also have an incredibly passionate community that offers opinions about everything gardening!