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What We Learn from Leafing Through Seed Catalogues

*They promise forty-pound beets, rhubarb that tastes like wine, tomatoes that look like stained-glass windows, and world salvation. It doesn't hurt to dream.*

**By Jill Lepore**

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*Arriving in the barren, wintry months, the catalogues sell the romance of sprouting, flowering, fruiting.*

Which is the beet of your dreams? The Johnny’s Selected Seeds catalogue, out of Winslow, Maine, has the reliable if unexciting Zeppo—presumably named after the youngest of the Marx Brothers—which boasts “minimal root hairs.” Unfortunately, Johnny’s \$5.50 packet is out of stock. Happily, you can still order five grams of Zeppo seeds for \$4.35 from an outfit called Territorial Seeds, based in Oregon, by scribbling your beet deets on the order form in the back of its catalogue. Like most seed catalogues, the one from Botanical Interests, out of Colorado, sells the Detroit Dark Red (\$2.69 for about a hundred seeds), “the standard for beets since 1892,” the warhorse, a tastes-good-and-stores-well variety bred in Canada and first introduced, in the catalogue of Michigan’s D. M. Ferry Seed Company, the year Grover Cleveland won back the White House. Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, of Missouri, prints a more-than-five-hundred-page Whole Earth Catalog-inspired Whole Seed Catalog, whose four glossy pages of beet varieties include not only the Detroit Dark Red (“deservedly the most popular all-purpose red beet”) but a golden whose roots “do not bleed or stain”; a variety called Crosby’s Egyptian, whose origins are actually German; a jicama look-alike called the Albino; a cylindrical red root from Denmark that resembles a fat, angry carrot; a ribboned heirloom from Italy which, when you cut it up, looks like peppermint candy; and a monster called the Mammoth Red mangel (\$4.00 for two hundred and fifty seeds), also known as the mangel-wurzel, which can weigh up to forty pounds and which you can use either to feed your livestock or to play a medieval sport known as “mangold hurling.” As near as I can tell, it’s similar to shot put, except with something that looks like a rutabaga.

There are more than two hundred mail-order seed companies in the United States, and, if you’ve ever ordered from any of them, chances are that your mail has been swollen with catalogues, their covers of radicchio red, marigold yellow, and zinnia pink peeking out from beneath the annual drab-gray crop of tax documents and the daily, dreary drizzle of bills, solicitations, and credit-card offers. You can order seeds online, but, in midwinter, seed companies will mail you their printed catalogues all the same, casting a line through your mail slot and dropping into your vestibule so much bait on a hook, rainbow-colored fly-fishing lures for dark-water trout. I bite every time.

Seed and garden catalogues sell a magical, boozy, Jack-and-the-beanstalk promise: the coming of spring, the rapture of bloom, the fleshy, wet, watermelon-and-lemon tang of summer. Trade your last cow for a handful of beans to grow a beanstalk as high as the sky. They make strangely compelling reading, like a village mystery or the back of a cereal box. Also, you can buy seeds from them.

Some seed catalogues open with a photograph of the company’s owners and a Dear Gardener annual update that can read like the family newsletters that used to come folded into Christmas cards. You find yourself happy to hear that someone has finished eighth grade and someone else has taken up sheepshearing, and highly relieved that most people seem to have come out of the pandemic still feeling the sun shine. “I have spent the last year battling and beating cancer and am entering 2023 with a renewed appreciation for life, and my returning health,” Melissa at Pinetree Garden Seeds writes from New Gloucester, Maine. “Here in central Virginia, we had decent enough weather, and were actually a bit on the cool side, with heavy rain in August, in contrast to most other folks,” the owners of Southern Exposure Seed Exchange report. “I survived competing at Nationals in the Olympic Triathlon ‘old as dirt’ division and swam a 3 mile open water event race,” the owner of Bluestone Perennials writes from Madison, Ohio. “The whole family is now playing pickleball.”

Inside, you’ll find illustrations—usually photographs but sometimes Audubon-elegant drawings—accompanied, plant by plant, with stats and vitals. It’s like reading the botanical version of a three-ring binder full of baseball cards, tucked into nine-a-page plastic sleeves. (“Mookie Betts, Los Angeles Dodgers. HT: 5'9". WT: 180. Bats Right, Throws Right. . . . Mookie’s impact on Los Angeles was instant.” As against: “Mignonette. *Reseda odorata*. A cottage garden favorite. . . . Height: 12" to 24". *Average seed life: 1 to 2 years.*”) The people who write for seed catalogues are probably influenced by copy not just for baseball cards but for children’s-toy catalogues and automobile-dealership Web sites—Botanical

Interests sells a bean called the Ferrari, as “sleek and slim as a sports car!”—and yet the best of the horticultural hawkers have a feel for the material, and a furry, pussy-willow charm. High Mowing Organic Seeds, from Wolcott, Vermont, sells a Seychelles pole bean (\$5.90 for a one-ounce packet), which it describes as “a prolific producer of perfect-quality, stringless pods with an archipelago of tender, small seeds inside each.” An archipelago of seeds! Sow True Seed, out of Asheville, North Carolina, describes a tomato called the Hillbilly (\$3.25 for fifty seeds) as having a yellow-and-crimson center that looks “like a stained-glass window”; it also advises that the rhubarb Victoria (\$3.25 for seventy seeds) has a “hint of wine flavor,” and explains that elephant garlic (\$15.95 per half pound) is “really a type of bulbing leek instead of true garlic.” Who knew?

Territorial Seeds describes a cucumber as “pickle-perfect,” a sweet potato’s flesh as “tie-dye,” and a head of lettuce as featuring “nice puckering.” At the other end of the beanpole, whoever writes for Botanical Interests confoundingly describes a cantaloupe as “grapefruit-sized,” and is alarmingly fond of wordplay: “This pea keeps its cool but can also take the heat!” or, about the Golden Jubilee, “Oh, the jubilation you will feel with this dazzling golden-orange, award-winning tomato!” I’d rather grow that stained-glass-window one.

Not all garden catalogues sell seeds. Bluestone Perennials, my favorite nursery, sells tiny plants packed into plantable pots made of the hairs of a coconut shell, like a tropical cocktail. Their plants sound like tropical cocktails, too. The Morello is a deer-resistant, upright pink perennial (\$15.95 each): “Whorls of tubular flowers climb the profuse burgundy rose, salvia-like spikes.” Reading the Bluestone catalogue, for me, is like reading a menu where I don’t understand any of the words but I’m sure my meal will be excellent. And, on the subject of eating, if you love to cook and are frustrated that you can’t find certain ingredients in stores, specialty seed catalogues mean that you can always grow exactly what you need. Kitazawa Seed Company, out of Salt Lake City, has been selling seeds for vegetables and herbs used in a host of Asian cuisines since 1917, and offers, for instance, the Korean Cuisine Garden, which “features traditional Korean red peppers for making red chili paste (gochujang) and a Korean cabbage used for making kimchi” (\$28.86, but currently out of stock).

The writing in these catalogues can, admittedly, be wacky: the lexicon for lushness easily tips into lewdness, especially for flowers but even for vegetables. Territorial Seeds, seemingly heedless of the emoji implications, describes an heirloom eggplant called the Listada de Gandia (\$4.45 for an eighth of a gram of seeds) as a plant whose “elongated, egg-shaped fruits reach 8 inches long, have a delicately mild flavor and tender, thin skin that’s streaked in violet and cream.” Ahem.

The catalogue from Harris Seeds, founded in Rochester, New York, in 1879, is, like a lot of the older catalogues, plainspoken and practical. “Dark green heads are high quality with a smooth dome and a medium small head” (Asteroid broccoli, \$4.99 for fifty seeds); “The 3-5 lb. blue-green, globe-shaped heads have a solid interior and hold well without splitting” (Blue Lagoon cabbage, \$3.91 for fifty seeds); “Tender sweet kernels fill out the ear well, and are protected by a tight husk” (Kickoff corn, \$11.15 for two hundred and fifty seeds). Compare that with the bumptious, baffling description of a broccoli-cauliflower blend called the Jacaranda from Fedco Seeds & Supplies, out of Clinton, Maine (\$6.50 for a tenth of a gram):

In a purple panic when Violet Queen was dropped, we clinked our glasses too soon over Burgundy—its utility patent violates Fedco’s seed ethics. Luckily, our trials revealed Jacaranda—large broad easy-to-harvest purple heads held high on tall bushy plants. Excellent for a fall harvest, Jacaranda can be cut at full head stage, or can be left to open for floret or “stick” style harvests. Colorful florets and sweet tender stems are superb raw or lightly steamed. A veggie for our times: let us recall the 1989 anti-apartheid slogan ‘The purple shall govern,’ which developed after police hosed down protesters with purple water.

Wait, what?

Printed seed catalogues date to about the middle of the eighteenth century, when they really only carried imports. In January, 1786, Peter Bellet, Florist and Seedsman, advertised in the *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser* that he “has yet on hand an extensive variety of the most rare bulbous FLOWERS and SEEDS, which have not been known before in this Country,” along with “Catalogues of the Names and Colours.” Long before that, and long after that, most people got seeds by harvesting and saving them—in bottles and jars, in slips of paper, in cloth sacks, in barns and silos. You didn’t need to buy seeds for things you could grow; you needed only to harvest and set aside some seeds for the next year, or swap with neighbors. Buying seeds from books was a gentleman’s hobby. In 1788, Benjamin Rush sent George Washington a pamphlet printed in London titled “An Account of the Culture and Use of the Mangel Wurzel, or Root of Scarcity,” informed him that “the botanists have agreed in its being a mongrel Species of the Beet,” and enclosed “a small portion” of seeds, which Washington planted below his stable.

Still, it's handy to buy seeds, especially if you want to try out new varieties. Shakers in upstate New York started a seed business in the seventeen-nineties and, not long afterward, invented the seed packet, a paper envelope bearing small quantities of seeds and a few details. Shakers sold their seeds, door-to-door, in ingeniously designed boxes. Salesmen then started carrying seed sample books, also door-to-door. Only after the advent of chromolithography did commercial growers begin printing mail-order catalogues. That they catered not just to farmers, who knew what they were doing, but also to a newfangled thing now called an urban gardener, is shown by the fact that these catalogues came complete with planting instructions: "The ground for an asparagus bed can scarcely be made too rich," one catalogue advised, in 1853. Also, ordering anything from a catalogue was new enough that most came with detailed instructions for how to do so, along with tales of failed orders. The Long Brothers' Eighth Annual Retail Catalogue of Floricultural Stock, out of Buffalo, New York, had a column called "Perplexities of Correspondence," which in 1876 reproduced a letter from a lady in Berlin, enclosing thirty cents and requesting a catalogue. "This is received from Berlin, *somewhere*," the exasperated Long Brothers explained, but there were no fewer than eighteen towns named Berlin in the United States. By the end of the nineteenth century, as Courtney Fullilove reports in "[The Profit of the Earth: The Global Seeds of American Agriculture](#)" (2017), the United States' imperial reach meant that seeds came, more and more, from afar. "We have searched the earth, from one end to the other, so to speak, for things not only new, but of actual value," the Crosman Seed Company boasted in 1894.

Some people save seeds; some people save old seed catalogues. Those catalogue collections have allowed scholars to document what happened to the American seed bank in the course of the twentieth century, when patented seeds, fertilizers, and insecticides increased crop yields, nearly destroyed the family farm, and dramatically diminished agricultural diversity. In 1900, nearly two in five Americans lived on farms and three in five lived in the country. Most people knew how to grow things. Then, beginning in the nineteen-twenties, came hybrid seeds, beginning with two varieties of corn. (Less than two per cent of Americans now work on farms; the biggest decline has been in the population of Black farmers, from nearly a million a century ago down to fewer than fifty thousand.) Hybrid corn grows well and can be resistant to wilt and rot, but you can't save the seeds and plant them the next year, because they don't grow true: you have to buy more seeds every year, from companies that own the patents. Hybrid corn made up less than ten per cent of the corn grown in Iowa in 1935, but ninety per cent by 1939 and a hundred per cent by 1946. Of the more than seven thousand varieties of apple grown in the United States in the nineteenth century, Janisse Ray writes in "[The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food](#)" (2012), eighty-six per cent no longer exist; nor do ninety-five per cent of cabbages, ninety-six per cent of field corns, ninety-four per cent of peas, and eighty-one per cent of tomatoes.

I think of the middle of the twentieth century as the age of Miracle-Gro, my mother's go-to garden product, first sold in the early nineteen-fifties. Seed catalogues sold seeds brought to you by the best scientists of the atomic era. These catalogues both charmed and exasperated Katharine S. White, a former fiction editor at this magazine, who wrote a piece called "[A Romp in the Catalogues](#)" in 1958—the year Rachel Carson, at the urging of White's husband, E. B. White, began research for the book that became "[Silent Spring](#)." "For gardeners, this is the season of lists and callow hopefulness: hundreds of thousands of bewitched readers are poring over their catalogues, making lists for their seed and plant orders, and dreaming their dreams," White began. She loved seed catalogues. But she was annoyed at everything marketed as "not only 'Bigger and Better' but 'Change'—change for the sake of change, it seems." Burpee's new giant hybrid zinnias "look exactly like great, shaggy chrysanthemums," White wrote. "Now, I *like* chrysanthemums, but why should zinnias be made to look like them?"

#### ADVERTISEMENT

In the nineteen-seventies, during a back-to-the-land movement, a lot of people started saving seeds, founding seed banks, and prying open jars and crates and packets in their grandparents' attics to find what they called heirloom seeds. William Woys Weaver was a student at the University of Virginia when he discovered his grandfather's seed collection in his grandmother's deep freezer. Weaver went on to write "[Heirloom Vegetable Gardening](#)" and now serves as the on-staff historian for the Whole Seed Catalog, contributing historical observations. The catalogue is full of such tidbits, about, for instance, a variety of asparagus called Conover's Colossal ("Produce merchant S. B. Conover of New York City developed it in the 1860s, selecting for the superior market qualities of massive spears and superior high yields") or a Chinese cucumber known as the Jade ("believed to have been brought from western China to the east during the Han dynasty in 216 A.D.").

Seeds are the new antiques. Territorial Seeds describes one of its strawberries this way: "Discovered in a Massachusetts garden over 125 years ago, Marshall was so prized that Pioneers carried it across the continent. It found a home in the Northwest, thriving and eventually becoming the signature taste Washington and Oregon's entire frozen fruit industry

was built on. And then disaster struck.” Save the Marshall strawberry! (At \$21.95 per plant, it is, however, sold out.) Buying seeds, according to a lot of these catalogues, is a political act—hence Fedco’s invoking the anti-apartheid movement to sell purple broccoli. In 1975, a couple in Missouri, starting out with two family heirlooms brought from Bavaria in 1884, founded the Seed Savers Exchange. It’s still around, a nonprofit “dedicated to the preservation of heirloom seeds,” and has been printing a catalogue for the past thirty years or so. Seed Savers, like many seed companies, is a signatory of the Safe Seed Pledge, created in 1999. It begins, “Agriculture and seeds provide the basis upon which our lives depend. We must protect this foundation as a safe and genetically stable source for future generations.” “Free the Seed!” is the motto of the Open Source Seed Initiative, established in 2012. All over the country, public libraries are giving away seeds at little seed libraries.

Farming is foundering. Gardening is growing. In the nineteen-fifties, seed catalogues sold hybrids, miracles of science: new and improved, bigger and better! In the twenty-twenties, when there are too few birds and butterflies, and too little of all kinds of wildlife, seed catalogues sell heirlooms with a promise to save the planet: old and endangered, but pure and free of corporate control. They’re selling you the idea that you can solve mangel-wurtzel-size problems—climate change, biodiversity loss, the farm crisis, and a looming food catastrophe—with a packet of seeds and a patch of dirt. “Bring in the bees, butterflies, and birds with our most popular garden kit!” Prairie Moon Nursery, from Winona, Minnesota, urges. (Its “potted gardens,” like the thirty-eight-plant, fourteen-species Pollinator Garden, for \$149, ship in May.) “Be a hero and plant this garden to support a herculean amount of wildlife!”

Or you could just grow some beets and eat them. You can plant them soon, so soon. Three weeks before the last frost: it’ll be here before you know it. Poke a hole in the ground half an inch deep. You can use your pinkie to measure, fingertip to first knuckle. The seeds of the common beet are about the size of peppercorns. Plop them in one by one, two inches apart. Rows are good. After a couple of weeks, when the tops pop up, yank out the seedlings that have come up too close together; I try to chuck them over the fence by smashing them with a trowel, as if they were little green-and-red badminton birdies. It passes the time. Wait another month, then dig up the roots and wash them off in the kitchen sink. They’ll be red-fleshed and globe-shaped and fist-size and grubby and hairy, and I usually roast them. You can even eat the leaves: they look like red-veined chard, and I have always found that they taste like dirt, but I don’t mind. ♦