

Haddam Garden Club

February 2023 Garden Blog Article

by Terry Twigg



Seed Shopping

Halfway from solstice to spring equinox, and winter is still dragging its feet. We've yet to see any significant snow, and temperatures still hover in the forties on a surprising number of days. I'm not writing winter off; I've seen too many February blizzards to discount Mother Nature. But the days are starting to lengthen, slowly but inexorably, and it's time to go seed shopping.

First, though, some homework. A few weeks ago I read an article declaring, "It's OK to Get Carried Away When You're Shopping for Flower Seeds." (New York Times, January 11, 2023.) Is it OK, though? Reading on, it becomes clear that the author is advising gardeners to give in to the temptation to buy a few new and unfamiliar varieties, which will add unexpected flair to your otherwise carefully planned garden scheme. (Sorry--my what?) I agree wholeheartedly with the sentiment, but the title seems unreasonably permissive, especially when I'm already fighting the siren call of catalogs promising free shipping, if only I order truly fantastical quantities of seeds. However hard I try, I never qualify for free shipping, because I'm never able to find everything I want in just one catalog. If only the company offering an irresistible blush-pink foxglove would also carry the yellow hollyhocks I've been imagining since last year! At some point, I will give in to the yellow hollyhocks, even if the shipping costs more than the seeds. It's an annual conundrum.

Also appropriate reading for the season is "A Garden From a Hundred Packets of Seed," by Oxford University poet and professor James Fenton. It's a slim book, essentially the author's musings on a list of one hundred favorites. Some he's grown forever, and cannot garden without; others flourish in that imaginary garden each of us visits at this time of year.

The idea of a garden containing only plants you've grown from seed is intriguing, but I'm skeptical. As the introduction points out, traditional garden design instructs us to consider the "bones" of the site: the hardscaping, trees and shrubs that serve as backdrop to the glorious summer display of (mostly) annuals from the list, and maintain interest through the colder months. I can't help thinking that a person gardening in a medieval city crammed with gothic buildings, stone courtyards and thousand-year-old yew trees is likely to have less need to consider "bones" than the gardener in a drab condo or a soulless new subdivision. Then, too, the milder English climate has a longer growing season than New England, offering a greater payoff for the painstaking process of growing annuals from seeds. As I make my lists, I'm constantly asking myself, "I want this plant, but is it worth allocating precious seed tray space to something that will die with the first frost?" Or conversely, "I want this perennial, but will I have the patience to nurture it through the year it will take to mature and bloom?" I can think of only two situations in which an entirely grown-from-seed

garden would work: at a summer vacation house, where the other seasons are irrelevant, or in a cutting garden. (Fenton thinks Americans refer to these as "posy patches," but the only people I've ever heard use the term "posy" are five years old and singing about London Bridge.)

Lazy gardeners increase their return by finding those plants that reseed themselves. Look for the term "hardy annual" in the catalogs, and watch for volunteer seedlings. Most will be in the immediate area of last year's flowers, but there will always be some wayward surprises, happily making themselves at home far from their original site. When my courtyard was new I planted six-packs of cosmos and cleome, and now their descendants greet me every spring, as do amaranthus and Persian shield. Marigolds and zinnias, in contrast, are "half-hardy annuals," a nonsensical term that means not hardy at all. They originated in hotter parts of the world, so their seeds won't survive the winter outdoors, and I must begin again every year. Some flowers we think of as annuals are in reality tender perennials, which live for years in their native hot climates but die in a Connecticut winter, but these may surprise you, too. Snapdragons, for example, are supposed to be one and done, but mine usually last two or three years before a particularly harsh winter finishes them off.

Regardless of the type, if you want to venture beyond the dozen or so old reliables offered at garden centers each spring, you're going to have to grow your own. Both the article and the book are unanimous in urging us to follow basic rules of seed-starting. Begin by charting the germination period for each variety and counting backward from the planting-out date. Seed-starting mix is designed for germination, but doesn't offer much in the way of nutrients for sustained growth, so you want to plant slow-starting, fussy varieties early but wait another few weeks to start the sprinters. Check for special germination requirements, like stratification (a period of cold storage) or scarification (scuffing or chipping a hard seed coat to help the embryo break through). And provide good light; even the sunniest windowsill may not be enough to support sturdy seedlings.

Hardest rule of all: once your seedlings have true leaves, thin them out! It's so painful to yank your precious babies, but trust me, it's essential. Crowded seedlings never become healthy plants. If you simply can't bear to discard them, pot up the extras, as I plan to do with the yellow hollyhocks. Look for them in this spring's plant sale.