

# A Wealth of Information: 4 Great Reasons to Order & Keep Seed Catalogs



Have you started receiving your seed catalogs yet? Mine have indeed begun arriving in my mailbox! I've set the pile aside during the holidays – I've been too busy cleaning, cooking, and entertaining to peruse them, but I look forward to when I have a chance to flip through the pages of delicious-looking produce.

When the catalogs start to arrive, it's a sign that it's time to start thinking about seed starting. Yes, even under a blanket of snow and frequent ice pellet showers, a gardener should have seed starting on the brain. But what if you already have everything set aside for seed starting – supplies and seeds alike. Do you really need to keep all those seed catalogs? What's the point?

## **Growing tips**

A lot of seed catalogs don't solely contain listings for seeds. Many provide a wealth of growing information and advice that's useful for beginner and intermediate gardeners. My

favorite catalogs include region-specific seed starting and planting charts.

## **Reference guide**

Have you successfully saved seeds throughout the seasons but lost your original seed packets? You may be able to find growing information inside a seed catalog. Many catalogs include helpful growing information for specific varieties of produce. Read the descriptions, and you might discover tips for individual plants that you never knew before – after all, not all seed packets are comprehensive. I've even ordered seeds that arrived in packets that contained zero planting and growing info. Thankfully, I always have a few seed catalogs on hand for easy reference.

## **Inspiration**

There's nothing quite like flipping through a gorgeous full-color seed catalog in the dead of winter. When everything is dead and covered in snow, browsing a large selection of seeds is enough to get your mouth-watering and give you the itch the garden again. It's the perfect way to get yourself psyched for indoor seed starting.

## **Coupons**

Who doesn't love free stuff? I pay nothing for the seed catalogs that arrive in the mail, and I sometimes feel like I'm stealing! I feel even luckier when the catalogs arrive with coupon codes attached. Some companies provide regular customers with discount codes and coupons, which are infinitely helpful when purchasing supplies in the spring.

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# You Need to Mulch Trees for the Winter: Here's Why



Are you worried about your tree's ability to withstand harsh winter weather? A bit of mulch might be your ticket to preserving new plant life in your garden.

Typically, mulching of trees is done in the fall, prior to freezing weather, in preparation for winter.

As we head deeper into the winter, there may still be time for folks in some regions to mulch and protect their trees.

It's a little late for those in northern areas, but regardless of where you live, read on to learn more about winterizing trees with mulch and discover whether it's necessary for your plants.

**What is mulch?**

Mulch is a protective layer of material placed around the base of a plant or tree. Examples of mulch materials include:

- Leaf mold
- Coco coir
- Wood chips
- Compost
- Straw
- Branches and pine needles

It's also possible to use inorganic mulching materials like faux rubber wood chips, but these don't break down and benefit the soil like organic options.

The most economical mulches are recycled materials like shredded fall leaves. Collect the leaves and reuse them for mulching for an environmentally friendly alternative to storebought mulch.

### **Purpose of mulch**

There are a few benefits to using mulch in your garden and around your yard. Mulch is useful for:

- Conserving moisture
- Suppressing weed growth
- Protecting root systems from cold weather

Over time, organic mulches also break down and help improve soil quality. Unlike inorganic substances, organic mulches also deliver added nutrients to the soil.

### **Using Mulch to Winterize Trees**

A layer of mulch applied in the fall protects tree roots from rapidly changing temperatures by conserving soil warmth. Mulch is especially important if you've recently planted saplings as they're more sensitive to temperature fluctuations than mature trees. Their root systems are also more vulnerable compared to root systems of the well-established plant life on your

property. The insulation provided by mulch prevents roots from damage caused by soil expansion and compaction during freeze and thaw cycles in the winter.

When mulching trees for the winter, it's essential to spread the right amount. Adding too much can suffocate a plant's roots. Don't pile it up around the trunk of a tree and avoid thick layers of mulch (2-3 inches should suffice).

### **Which trees do I need to mulch?**

Trees and plant life that are native to your region don't require mulching for winter protection. Don't waste your time mulching the big maple tree in your backyard. It doesn't need it. It's well adapted to the climate and has already established itself.

Other native, hardy plants like certain types of rose bushes shouldn't require winter protection either.

Some trees and bushes may benefit from winter cover, but not mulch.

Focus on mulching recently planted trees and shrubs. Young trees haven't yet built up an established root system and benefit from a layer of cozy, insulating mulch.

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## **5 Fun Hobbies to Keep You Busy This Winter**





The ice has arrived. It covers the roads, the driveway, and most of the garden. The leftover plants have turned into icy statues. The wind blows, and they remain immobile. The light coating of snow makes everything look intensely beautiful, though. At this time of year, I get to sit down and enjoy the first full month of no-gardening. There are no more tools to clean or put away. There's nothing more to remove from the earth – everything is frozen, so I couldn't even if I wanted to. There's nothing left to harvest, and I no longer visit the garden beds each morning. They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and I think it's true of gardening, as well.

It's easy to slip into a bad attitude at this time of year. The cold and ever-changing weather makes people cranky. I'm lucky that I happen to enjoy the chilly temperatures, but I understand how darker days and inclement weather take their toll. When your favorite hobby has to be put on hold, what are you supposed to do?

I like to take the extra time as an opportunity to spend time on other hobbies. Winter is the ideal time to sink your teeth into a new hobby or re-discover activities that you tend to neglect the rest of the year while you garden.

Here are a few recommendations:

## **Cross-stitch**

I've yet to physically cross-stitch anything, but I've made it a point to read about it. My goal is to complete one project before I have to get into the nitty-gritty of seed starting – which may be sooner rather than later since the catalogs have already begun arriving in my mailbox!

## **Reading**

I'm an avid reader twelve months out of twelve, but there's nothing quite like snuggling up with a book in the wintertime. Even non-readers might enjoy flipping through the pages of a good book when the temperature dips. If reading fails to keep your attention, try listening to audiobooks. If you really miss gardening and can't stop thinking about your favorite hobby, pick out stories with gardening-related twists, or grab a non-fiction gardening book to learn something new.

## **Cooking**

Crack open the cookbooks on your shelf and learn how to utilize all of the produce you've harvested and preserved. Find recipes that inspire you to use the jars of tomatoes, frozen peas, and dried fruit you collected earlier in the year.

# Snowshoeing

Gardening is a fairly active hobby, especially if you have a large plot of land. Weeding, digging, and moving around structures and dirt takes quite a bit of energy. Don't sit around all winter and do nothing! Keep your body moving. The cold weather doesn't have to bar you from heading outside. One of my favorite winter activities is snowshoeing – you'll find plenty of affordable options at most big box stores or sports shops. It's a great way to discover trail networks nearby and work up a sweat.

# Indoor planting

Can't stop thinking about the summer gardening season? If you really miss your plants and can't fathom getting into any other hobby, why not brush up on your indoor gardening skills. Some of the best gardeners I know are lousy when it comes to taking care of indoor plants. If you can't seem to keep a plant alive for more than a month, spend December, January, and February learning how to properly care for potted plant life. Not sure which plant to introduce into your space? Try an air plant!

Do you have any winter hobbies? What activities do you turn to when gardening is not an option? Leave a comment and let me know ☐

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# Reasons Why Tomato Foliage



# Curl



At one time, your gorgeous tomato plant was dotted with juicy, bright red fruit and had brilliant healthy green leaves. Now, the plant is looking under the weather, and its leaves are curling up. What's going on? Why is your tomato plant taking a turn for the worse? Why does tomato foliage curl?

Tomatoes are relatively easy to grow. The right conditions produce delicious fruit. Unfortunately, unlike other edible garden plants, tomatoes are susceptible to a variety of pests, diseases, and problems. If something in the soil or environment is off, your tomato plant will send up signals, including curled leaves.

Here are a few reasons your plant might be experiencing leaf curl and how to troubleshoot:

# Disease

Viral infections may cause tomato leaf curl. Pests transmit many plant viruses, so inspect the foliage carefully to check for an infestation. Diseased foliage also often exhibits other symptoms such as yellowing. If the problem is disease-related, you'll typically notice other signs that your plant is unhealthy. Upward curling may be the result of a virus or environmental stress. Tomato mosaic virus, however, typically causes downward curling along (fruit is also affected).

If your tomato plant is infected with a virus, you should dispose of it as soon as possible to prevent infecting neighboring plants. Throw infected plants away, and do not put them in your compost bin.

# Environmental Stress

Leaf curl may occur as a result of environmental stress and there are plenty of ways the environment can affect your tomato plant.

- Transplant shock
- Excessive pruning
- Wind damage
- Lack of water
- Too much water
- High temperatures
- Too much fertilizer

In cases where foliage curl is caused by environmental stressors, the situation is easy to rectify. Is drought causing the problem? Then be sure to water consistently or install an irrigation system. If transplant shock is the issue, try extending the hardening off period or waiting to transplant until temperatures have leveled off.

If you don't deal with environmental stress, your plant may

fail to produce fruit or leave you with a very meager harvest.

## **Pests**

The presence of pests increases the chance of viral contamination. A large pest presence may also cause leaf curling. A tomato plant infested with aphids may exhibit leaf curl. It's possible to manually remove the bugs (a strong stream of water from your garden hose should do) but keep an eye on your plant. Pests bring disease and there's a chance your plant may need to be removed from your garden.

To prevent pest infestations remove diseased plant material as soon as possible, inspect plants purchased from outside sources before transplanting them into your garden, and cultivate healthy soil (avoid over-fertilizing, rotate crops, etc.)

## **Weed Killer Damage**

Certain types of weed killers may also cause tomato leaf curl. The plant damage that results from herbicide contamination is not reversible, and plants are usually harmed beyond repair. How do you avoid this type of damage? Avoiding herbicide is your best bet. If you decide to use weed killers, be sure to use them carefully. Pay close attention to manufacturer guidelines. In cases where herbicide is the culprit, the leaves are usually heavily deformed. Don't use weed killer? If your plants are located close to city sidewalks or neighboring yards, someone else might be spraying the chemicals that are harming your plants.

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# A Restful Season



The snow blankets my garden beds, and I peer out longingly at them each morning. The frozen ground is no longer fit to be dug, and most of the straggler plants have wilted away. Each year I have grand plans to build cold frames and harvest through the winter. I tried it once in my previous garden, but the area was too shaded to sustain life in the [winter](#). I intend to go through with the task at some point but, for now, I'm content with having a winter break.

I miss the garden, yet I'm thankful for the respite. I spend my winters pouring time into other hobbies; reading, in particular. A moment away from the plants and weeds helps keep me on my toes in the spring. I imagine that if I gardened twelve months of the year, I'd get sick of it. I enjoy the time off. It allows me to reflect on the season now behind me. What went wrong? What was successful? Is there something I forgot to plant? Is there a crop I should avoid planting next



year? When I feel like it, I create lists and plan for the upcoming gardening season. It's never a chore because I do it when the mood strikes. I have plenty of time to revise and rework my [plans](#), too. The winter is a leisurely planning period – it never feels like work.

This restful period is well earned. As a gardener, I spend the spring, summer, and part of the [fall](#), prepping, planting, nurturing, and harvesting. It's hard work. By the winter, I'm spent. Now that the holidays are around the corner, I'm thankful to have the extra time to prepare to receive guests. It's also a time when the household starts to toss germs back and forth. I've been lucky enough to avoid winter illnesses for years. This time around, though, I've been walloped. I've been bundled up in my blanket, saddled with a fever and a throat that feels as if it's on fire. Sipping my herbal tea, I look out on the quiet, still garden, and feel grateful that we're both able to take advantage of a little rest.

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## **How Much Dirt Does my Raised Bed Garden Need?**



One of the benefits of raised bed gardening is the ability to use your own soil mix. It's a serious advantage for those stuck living in places where the soil quality is poor or where there's no soil to speak of (e.g., those who have a concrete yard).

But how do you figure out how much dirt you need for your raised bed? It seems daunting, but it's really a simple math problem.

## How much soil do you need?

Here's what you need to calculate how much soil your garden bed requires:

**The Dimensions of Your Garden Bed(s):** What's the total volume of the bed's interior? Think back to high school math class now. Volume is determined by multiplying width, height, and depth.

Here's a real-world example:



- My beds are 4 feet by 4 feet, with a depth of 3 feet. The volume of the interior is  $4 \times 4 \times 3 = 48$  cubic feet.
- If you have more than one bed, you'll need to multiply that total to get your final volume required.
- I have four beds of this size, so I'll need a total of  $48 \times 4 = 192$  cubic feet of soil.

Thankfully, most soil is sold by the cubic foot, so it should be reasonably easy to figure out how many bags or truckloads you'll need to be delivered.

Buying from somewhere that uses a different unit of measurement? Use a simple conversion calculator online.

## Your Soil Mix

You've figured out how much soil you need to fill your raised beds. Great! Now it's time to decide what type of mix you'll use to fill them.

Some garden centers sell and deliver soil mixes in bulk, but they're not always the right blend for a vegetable garden. Ask what the mix consists of before ordering.

The Square Foot Gardening Foundation recommends equal parts of the following when creating a homemade soil mix (also called *Mel's Mix*) for raised beds:

- Compost (preferably from a variety of sources)
- Peat moss
- Vermiculite

The mix promotes proper airflow and drainage. It's also filled with nutrients and doesn't dry out as quickly as other soil mixes.

## Soil Mix on a Budget

Struggling with the high cost of bags of soil, compost, vermiculite, and peat moss? Check with your local garden center to find out about the cost of soil delivery. Deliveries in bulk – dumped in your driveway or on your property and not in bags – are typically cheaper than buying bags separately.

If that still seems too pricey, consider filling your boxes with compost only. It's not an ideal solution, but it's a workable and affordable one.

Because my boxes are quite high, filling them was a huge and expensive challenge. I had to find workarounds to be able to fill them without enough soil.

## Bulk Up Your Beds

If you're on a tight budget, consider the use of filler materials to reach the desired soil level in your raised beds.

Use inexpensive things to bulk up your raised beds. Examples include:

- Dead leaves
- Sand
- Layers of cardboard
- Leftover dirt from construction projects (check online marketplaces for free dirt available around town)
- Rocks
- Poor-quality soil (snatch up cheap bags of filler soil at your local hardware store when it goes on sale . Fill up the bottom of your beds with the lower-quality stuff before adding a premium or custom mix on top)

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# Prepping for the Holidays: Cooking in Advance



Canadian Thanksgiving has already come and gone, but Americans are patiently awaiting the day when they'll get to enjoy turkey, stuffing, and all the delicious sides. Other holidays are around the corner, too. Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hannukah, and New Years, all coming in hot. Are you already stressing about your next family gathering? Whether you're the host who's fretting about what to put on the table or you're worried about what to contribute to the table as a guest, there's no shortage of anxiety around the holidays. There's certainly enough stress to go around! In the summer, the bounty of the garden makes it easy to whip up last minute salads and pasta dishes. In the fall and winter, when the garden has closed

down for the year, pickings are slim. So what's a gardener to do to impress?

As soon as Halloween has come and gone, I tuck away the spooky decor and autumn motifs. I lug out the big plastic bin from under the stairs and pick out a few wintry decorations to adorn the credenza. I also start to think about cozier food fare. In the kitchen, I cook up soups and stews. I swap t-shirts for sweaters and always have the perfect candle burning (right now, it's a delicious cranberry one).

I also find myself prepping more foods. I batch cook and freeze leftover portions because it's not always easy to muster up the desire to chop, stir, and cook during the cold months. I love to cook, don't get me wrong! But winter is also my favorite time for reading, and I sometimes find it hard to pry myself away from a good story.

November and December have me thinking about upcoming festivities. I wonder not only about what I can bring to the dinner, party, or gathering. I'm also thinking about how I can show others I care. It's not always easy when you're on a tight budget. Cooking and baking is one of the easiest ways to spread joy and bring people together. A tin of homemade cookies is a truly heartfelt gift. A jar of homemade jam is one of my favorite gifts to receive. At this time of year, I love creating goodies for loved ones in my kitchen. I also love to learn and try new things. This year, it's making pies.

## **A plan: making dough ahead of time**

I'm part of a cookbook club and our book this month is all about baking. Pies specifically. I don't love sweets, but I'm eager to learn new skills and find new ways to combine delicious flavors. Pies, though, are intimidating to the novice baker. My plan to tackle the myriad of recipes is to cut the steps up into pieces. Making the dough in advance, freezing it, and saving the assembly part for another day. I

don't really like pies all that much. I'm not much of a sweets person. But I figure I'll be all set for the holidays if my freezer is packed to the brim with premade dough and pies.

Here's the [recipe for the pie crust](#) I'll be trying. Join me in a pie-making adventure this November. Tell me about your trials, tribulations, and successes.

What's a non-gardening winter activity that helps you cope with the months away from regular gardening duties? I can't be the only gardener who seeks to fill the void in winter by trying out other unexplored hobbies and activities.

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## Closing Down the Garden



Here's your quick reminder that now is probably the time to

start thinking about closing up the garden if you haven't already done so. The cold weather is slowly trickling in, and garden production is creeping to a halt. Don't wait till the last minute to put away tools, pull out plants, and get everything ready for the [winter](#) season. Scrambling at the last minute is a pain in the neck. Trust me. I've done it. Once the snow starts to fall, every task you had planned becomes infinitely more challenging to complete. What does closing the garden entail? Here's a quick breakdown of tasks to put on your to-do list:

**Pull out dead plants.** Don't leave dead plant material behind. It's likely to attract pests and may even be harboring disease.

**Cut back perennials** (Careful. Some perennials are best pruned in the fall, while others do best when pruned in the spring).

**Don't stop harvesting.** There are likely still a few goodies left to pick; be it lettuce, [kale](#), or Asian greens.

**Tackle any overgrown areas that are filled with weeds.** If you don't do it now, you'll have to deal with it in the spring.

**Tidy up accessories.** Put away any decorations or delicate items sitting around your garden, deck, porch, or patio.

**Disinfect.** Clean your tools and store them safely away. Tidy up your [seed starting](#) equipment if you haven't already.

**Mulch, mulch, mulch.** Mulch tender plants and perennials before winter arrives.

**Add protection.** Protect your winter-hardy plants with a cold frame if you haven't done so yet. Don't forget to keep watering them!

**Encourage healthy soil.** Consider planting cover crops if it's still warm enough in your area.



**There's still time for planting, too!** Fall is the ideal planting time for a variety of flower bulbs. If you've ordered seed [garlic](#), you should be receiving it soon and planting it as soon as it arrives. Certain trees and shrubs also do best when planted in the fall.

**Keep watering your plants.** They ain't all dead yet and they're still thirsty!

**Prep your beds.** I like to mulch mine with leaves prior to the winter. This year, I've also added cardboard atop my beds to keep weeds down. I'll enjoy a bit of a blank slate when the spring comes around.

*Do you have any fall garden rituals? Is there something you always forget to do? Have you learned new tricks of the trade throughout the years? Leave a comment and share your garden clean up tips!*

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## **5 Quick-Growing Trees to Consider Planting This Fall**



Fall is the optimal time to plant many tree species. It's dryer than most months and not too warm. Heat is unlikely to damage young newly planted trees, and root systems are more likely to thrive in fall conditions.

If you're looking for a quick-growing tree to plant this fall, we've got five suggestions below.

A word of caution: while fast-growing trees are an attractive option for those who want quick results, they're not always an ideal choice. If you're in need of a tree to act as a windbreak or to provide shade, don't jump into planting without doing your research. Ask questions, and don't plant something without doing due diligence; you may later regret your decision. Rapid growing plants of all kinds pose a few significant problems of note. Quick-growing trees are more likely to experience breakage. Some trees may grow so fast that they're challenging to care for and keep healthy.

## **Red Maple**

Red maples are native to eastern and central North America and are one of my favorite trees. If you're out and about in the fall for leaf-peeping, chances are you're searching for red maples since they provide a blast of brilliant foliage in the autumn. They're relatively rapid growers and can grow up to 60 feet in height. Unfortunately, the rapid growth, in turn, produces weak branches that are susceptible to breakage.

## **Paper Birch**

The thin wisps of paper-like bark that peel off this tree are perfect for use as kindling when building a campfire. Paper birch trees are also fast growers. They grow relatively tall – up to 70 feet in height, but they're susceptible to breakage and don't thrive in areas with high levels of pollution.

## **Cherry Laurel**

While this is more of a shrub than a tree, it grows quickly and is one of the sturdier options in this list of five. It doesn't grow much taller than 30 feet and I love it for its colorful berries – careful, though! They're poisonous. Planted incorrectly and without thought, cherry laurel may become invasive, so don't plant without doing some background research.

## **Bald Cypress**

These coniferous trees grow in swampy around in the Southern U.S. They get fairly tall (over 60 feet). They look impressive, but they're vulnerable to pests. They're also a little slower to grow than the other trees mentioned.

## **Acacia**

I love acacias, but they're destined for warmer climates than here, unfortunately. If you're lucky enough to live in planting zones 9 to 11, though, you can enjoy the lovely



display of this tree on your property. The maximum height depends on the variety. The drawback to growing acacias? They're a short-lived tree species.

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## **Avoid These 5 Costly Fall Garden Mistakes**



Summertime errors in gardening are usually easy to fix. Forgot to prune your tomatoes, and now the foliage is out-of-control? No problem. Just trim the excess and choose an appropriate support structure. Forgot to water for a few days? Most plants will be fine, and if not, it's likely you still have time to re-plant or re-sow.

Early in the season, mistakes are a little more challenging to

handle. Didn't choose the right seed starting medium, and now your seedlings are suffering from damping off? Yikes. You'll have to start all over again. The situation is salvageable but frustrating. Thankfully, though, errors in seed starting aren't typically expensive to remedy.

If you mess up in the fall, though. Mistakes may be costly. Here are five mistakes you don't want to make when temperatures dip and the leaves start to change:

### **Not storing your hose for the winter**

I've accidentally forgotten my hose outside on multiple occasions. It often happens because winter sort of sneaks up on us like a ghost. One day it's pleasantly cool out, the next, we're experiencing a snowstorm of epic proportions. Leaving your hose outside when the snow starts to pile up means you'll likely have to purchase a new one next year. The cold will freeze any remaining water droplets inside, which can expand and rupture the tube. Even if you've adequately drained the accessory, freezing cold weather is enough to crack the exterior of your hose and render it useless.

### **Not shutting off outdoor water supply**

Even if snowstorms haven't yet arrived, temperatures below zero can burst outdoor pipes and damage any outdoor water accessories, like hoses. In our household, we typically shut off the outdoor water supply in October (this weekend, actually). In our region, the season is rainy enough to support any remaining plant life, and if not, it's easy enough to hand-water the minimal number of plants still left in the garden.

### **Leaving dead plant matter in your garden beds**

It's so easy to do, but please don't do it! Thoroughly clean up your beds to prevent pesky organisms from hiding out. You might find yourself haunted by your mistake next season. It's

especially important to remove dead plants if they were diseased or infested in any way.

### **Tossing diseased plants in your compost**

When removing dead plants, don't throw them into your compost bin. If your city has a brown bin, toss dead plants there, instead. Home compost bins just don't reach the same temperatures as large commercial piles, so they're unable to kill certain bacteria and fungi that cause disease. I like to stay on the safe side and put all my spent plants in the city compost. I'm too paranoid about pest and disease to take a chance.

### **Not wearing long pants and gloves while raking**

I hate raking, which is why I've often cut corners when performing this task in the past. I rush through it, wearing whatever I threw on in the morning, and I often forget to don gloves. This is BAD. Don't do it. Always wear a long-sleeved shirt, pants, and gloves when cleaning up leaves. Why? Ticks love to hide out in leaf debris. I'd also suggest keeping your pets away from large piles of leaves to prevent them from picking up these disease-ridden bloodsuckers.