

# Planting Seeds of Doubt

## *How to read between the lines in a seed catalog*

By Ray Novitske, Fairfax Master Gardener

A historic blizzard is raging outside while I peruse the garden catalogs I received in the mail this month. They have been languishing on my coffee table, beckoning me with colorful, new plant introductions slathered across their covers. I usually wait for an appropriate time (like during a snowstorm) before examining their content. A garden catalog, a snowstorm and a cup of hot chocolate are a surefire combination to get the gardening juices flowing. But before I — or you — place any orders from these catalogs, let's consider some of the tactics they use to entice customers.

First, there are the so-called *new* introductions. *New* is a relative term, thrown around in gardening catalogs as often as compost is in our gardens. A *new*, light-yellow cosmos caught my eye in a recent 2016 catalog. A quick Internet search for the 'Xanthos' cosmos, however, reveals that it was introduced in 2014, and several catalogs have offered the seeds for sale since then. While this may be the first year the catalog before me now has offered 'Xanthos,' it is certainly not new to the gardening community.



photo: Thompson & Morgan Seeds

*Xanthos cosmos photo in seed catalog*

*New* has other issues, too; I equate it with *expensive*. With many new introductions, quantities on hand for sale are usually limited. It may take several years to develop enough seed stock and inventory to satisfy the gardening world's demand for the unique. With a limited supply and great interest, prices follow the laws of supply and demand. *Rare* seeds also mean higher-priced seeds. When encountering new catalog introductions, I usually turn the page and wait a few years for more product availability and for demand to fall along with prices.



photo: Purdue Extension P&PDL

*Echinacea 'Sundown'*

Experience also shows that new is not always better or an improved version of the original. For example, take Echinacea, our native purple coneflower. When breeders got their hands on it, they began developing a lot of variations in color and form. Some cultivars, in particular the Big Sky series, were introduced awhile back, and I was suckered into buying one called 'Sundown'. My new coneflower was not as robust as our native. Years afterward, I learned that my experience is shared by others who grow this one — all Big Sky series coneflowers seem to have this problem of looking somewhat infirm and flaming out in summer.

There are a few other terms found in catalogs that deserve suspicion. Beware of *prolific* or *vigorous* growers; these descriptors often mean *spreads out of control* and *invasive*. Companies obviously are able to sell more seeds for plants they label as *vigorous*, as opposed to *invasive*.

With the increasing interest in native species, many catalogs like to use the term native in their descriptions. Our native Echinacea attracts all types of pollinators. One Echinacea cultivar I grow is 'Coconut Lime.' I have never seen a bee or butterfly on its flower, even though the nearby native purple is covered with them. I believe the cultivar developed from our native is too difficult for a pollinator to get their proboscis down to the pollen -- it is too deep inside the pompom-like petals. Catalogs list the native species, then follow with all the cultivars, hoping you will equate the two. Cultivars do not always have the same characteristics as the natives do.



photo: by author

*Echinacea 'Coconut Lime'*

Another way seed catalogs try to entice you into a purchase is to feature irresistible photos. I always tell people, "Plants and flowers don't look like they do in a catalog." Case in point: I wanted a unique allium and found 'Persian Blue' in a catalog photo. The flowers were a beautiful blue, but the leaves were also blue, and even the soil was blue, indicating that the photo had been through Photoshop to increase the blue coloring. I wondered how many customers ordered 'Persian Blue' only to be disappointed when the color was more like a purple.

Similarly, the catalog photos of the 'Xanthos' cosmos show a dense cluster of large blooms. How beautiful that would look in my garden – if it were only true. I grow cosmos and know that cosmos do not produce a cluster of flowers like that. Either someone cut the plants and grouped them in a vase for the photo, or someone off-camera is holding the plants together in a bunch. The adjacent photo shows how they actually look in a garden. If I'm interested in a plant that is unfamiliar to me, I search the Internet for a photo of the entire plant in the garden for an accurate view of what I should expect in my garden.



photo: Chris Young @SeeWhyGardens

*Xanthos cosmos in the garden*

One last tip is to compare price, of course. For the 'Xanthos' cosmos, Park Seed charges \$2.95 for a seed pack and Burpee expects \$5.95, with three other companies' prices falling somewhere in between the two.

The catalogs offer you a greater selection of seeds than your local stores. They are full of colorful photos and equally colorful descriptions. Sometimes, we just need to read between the lines and remember that the main purpose of catalogs is to sell. A little bit of knowledge and information can go a long way in making sure we are making good buying decisions.