

Favorite Seeds for the New Year

by Vera Strader

Seed catalogs are filling our mailboxes while gardeners everywhere dream of spring. Too often we end up with seeds that either don't get planted or that just don't grow. Here are some savvy seed growing tips based on a survey of local Master Gardeners.

BLOOMING SUCCESSES: The number-one hands-down vote getter was sweet peas. Sweet peas welcome spring with four weeks of unsurpassed color and fragrance. For success, plant while days are still cool; protect tasty young seedlings from hungry birds.

Flowers that self-sow were also a runaway vote-getter. With many reseeders, the trick is to get a few "mother plants" established first, which in turn will adorn your yard with their volunteer offspring each spring.

Calendulas, says Kathy Nunes, "pop up from last year's seeds like crazy!" Later she collects the dried seed heads and spreads them over empty pots and bare patches, so they come up again months later. She suggests this "no brainer technique" for marigolds as well.

Sandy Smith likes sparaxis or harlequin flower, a corm (small bulb), for its generous reseeding and colorful, late spring charm. Cosmos also reseeds readily for some.

Two native pollinator favorites are California poppies and silver lupine (*Lupinus albifrons*). Other self-seeders for pollinators include honeywort (*Cerinthe major 'Purpurascens'*), an early bloomer with nectar-laden blue flowers, and red gilia (*Ipomopsis rubra*) which, when deadheaded, produces red trumpet-like blossoms from summer to frost.

For summer-long bloom in shaded areas, try "poor man's orchid" or "popcorn impatiens" (*Impatiens balfourii*), a common pass-along plant. Nicotiana also generously regrows, ranging from red and pink mid-height beauties to white, fragrant four-footers (*N. sylvestris*).

Zinnias, which sometimes resow, are hits during our long, hot summers. Becky Cripps says she "literally threw" 'Raggedy Anne,' 'Granny's Bouquet,' and 'Hot Crayon' zinnia seeds, along with a little compost, into the soil in late June. They grew window high, blooming profusely, until frost. Creeping zinnias and Profusion zinnias also rated mention.

THE GARDEN PANTRY: Volunteer tomatoes growing from the previous year's crop garnered an enthusiastic vote. In contrast, Robert Allen, an heirloom tomato enthusiast, tries new varieties each year from the Totally Tomatoes catalog. He has most success in his higher-elevation garden with German and Hungarian varieties. He also grows peppers and an assortment of root vegetables and beans plus flowering plants to entice pollinators.

Julie Segerstrom likes "bomb proof" seeds and calls her asparagus beans (an Asian long bean) "a lazy man's delight" for their heavy crop, easy picking and delicious flavor. She also plants fava beans.

Dona King grows the Three Sisters, a Native American tradition; some seeds were carried along the Trail of Tears forced march. Corn is planted first, providing a support for beans that climb up the corn and also enrich the soil. The squash spreads out and shades the soil to help retain moisture and reduce weeds. The corn, beans, and squash can all be eaten while young with some allowed to mature for winter food or subsequent replanting. ‘Cherokee White,’ ‘Hopi Blue,’ and ‘Navajo Robin’s Egg’ corn and ‘Guatemalan Blue’ banana squash are some varieties Dona grows.

TOOLS FOR SUCCESS: Val Myrick plants seeds only if the plants are difficult or expensive to buy or if she needs a lot of a particular plant. “There is no sense growing six marigolds when I can buy them in six-packs for the same expense” she says. When starting seeds inside, she uses grow lights with one cool and one warm bulb. A heat mat aids germination for seeds requiring warmth.

For Tuolumne County gardening resources including vegetable seed planting dates, see http://cecentralssierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/Favorite_Gardening_Resources/. Go to <http://www.vegetablegardener.com/item/7315/a-new-crop-of-seed-catalogs> to find reviews and contact information for several seed catalogs.

Seed enthusiasts also find “Park Success with Seed” helpful. This book provides photographs of over 400 plants along with germination times and growing tips.

Vera Strader is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County who tries new garden seeds each year. Armenian cucumbers and butternut squash are all time hits.

UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralssierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.