



Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

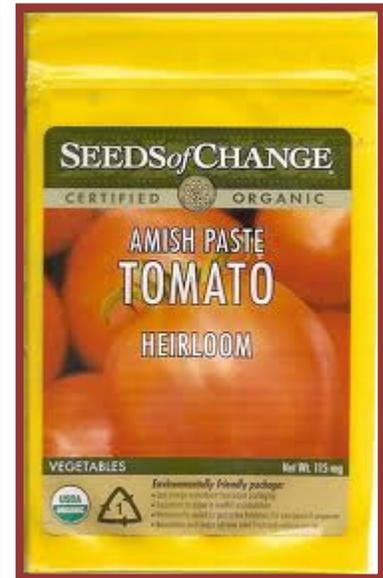
Taking the Mystery Out of the Seed Packet

by Dana Young, UC Master Gardener

With spring on the horizon, now is the perfect time to buy garden seed. There is a great deal of information written on seed packets, beginning with the name of the seed and the specific variety. Take, for instance, the tomato. There are so many kinds of tomatoes; it can be difficult to decide which to buy. Some are better eaten fresh, while others are fleshier and are better used for canning or for making into sauces. This information is usually briefly explained under the product description. Tomatoes are either determinate or indeterminate and this is always written on the package. Determinate tomatoes are field or patio types. They have short, bushy vines and the tomatoes usually ripen all at once, which is a bonus for canning and drying. Indeterminate varieties often grow six feet tall or more and produce fruit over several months in our climate. These varieties frequently end up in our salads and on our burgers.

Modern technology has found its way to the seed aisle! Some packets have a QR code on the back to allow customers access to further information by scanning it right there in the store with a smart phone. In addition, most varieties of vegetable, herb or flower have a four digit product code written next to the company's web address. Simply go to the company's website and type the product code into the search box. Here, you can learn more about not only a particular variety, but also how it compares to other products offered.

Usually, seed is designated as hybrid or heirloom. (GMO seed is not sold for private use at this time). Both have a place in the home garden. The advantage of a hybrid seed is that it is bred specifically for certain attributes, such as disease resistance. Oftentimes on a hybrid tomato seed package, you will find the letters FFFVNT. This indicates resistance to two races of Fusarium, Verticillium, Nematodes and Tobacco Mosaic Virus. The disadvantage of hybrid seeds is that you cannot save the seed from the fruit and plant it next year as, it will not reproduce true to seed. Also, the seed often has a shorter shelf life. Heirloom seeds are from strains of seeds that have been true for at least fifty years. Most heirlooms have been saved and selected because they have the best flavor and production in home and small market gardens. Unless they cross-pollinate with surrounding plants of the same kind, they will be consistent in their attributes and are wonderful for seed savers.



Heirloom seed



Saving seeds

Most seeds will keep for several years in an unopened packet. Good quality seed has high germination rates, and most varieties will keep easily for the next growing season. (Exceptions to this rule, however, are onions, parsley, lettuces, larkspur and delphinium. These do not reliably germinate as they age and are best purchased fresh each year.) Keep in mind that the germination rate for saved seeds may be reduced, so you will need to sow more seed. To ensure that opened packets stay fresher longer, place them in a mason jar with the lid closed tightly to keep air and moisture out or in a freezer weight Ziploc bag. Be sure to label them! Never leave leftover seed packets outside in the garden, in the garage or in an unheated outdoor shed, because high humidity and dampness will damage them. Store the jar or bag away from heat and light. Keep the seeds dry and in the coolest room in the house. Plan to use them the next season for the best results.

Often, there is a map with designated planting dates as well as sunlight needs on the back of the seed packet. Seed spacing and planting depth are also noted. In the past, the distance between rows reflected the need for farm equipment to pass through. This spacing is changing because more and more home gardeners are using growing boxes. Shorter plants can usually be planted in rows no farther apart than the distance noted for plant spacing. Just make sure when planting tall plants that you can reach between rows. Be aware that light and air need to flow between the plants.

I hope I helped you and have fun gardening!

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