

Helpline Hot Topic for August 2020

Unsolicited Seed Packages – Have You Received One?

By Cynthia Zimmerman

Unsolicited suspicious packages of seeds that appear to be predominantly coming from China are being shipped to people across the country. So far residents in 28 states, including California, have received them. The seeds are not uniform or of any particular type, ranging from ornamental, fruit and vegetable to herbs and weeds. The package labeling indicates they contain a variety of products, such as beads and jewelry. Those receiving them seem to be individuals who have recently made an online purchase.

The main concern is determining whether the seeds pose significant risk to agriculture and natural resources in the U.S. Imported vegetable and agricultural seeds must meet specific phytosanitary and labeling standards and be inspected at the port of entry. Some seeds, including citrus, corn, cotton, okra, tomato, and pepper seeds, may require import permits. Other seed species are prohibited. USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the U.S. Postal Service, and State departments of agriculture are all working together to determine the potential for the seeds to introduce diseases and pests. Some of the mystery seeds appear to have been coated with something, possibly insecticide or fungicide. There is also concern that some of the seeds might be invasive species that could cause the destruction of native crops and introduce diseases to native plants or be dangerous to livestock

If you or someone you know receives such a package please do the following:

- Save the seeds and package including the mailing label.
- Don't open the seeds.
- Don't plant the seeds.
- Place everything in a zip lock bag in a mailing envelope. Include your name, address, and phone number/email address so that a State or Federal agriculture official can contact you if needed.
- Contact the State plant regulatory official <https://nationalplantboard.org/california/> or APHIS State Health Plant Director <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/planthealth/ppq-program-overview/sphd/california> for instructions on where to send the package or to arrange a no-contact pick up or drop-off location.

If you already planted the seeds:

- Remove the seeds or plants with at least 3 inches of the surrounding soil putting it inside a plastic bag.
- Squeeze the air out of the bag and tightly seal it.
- Put the bag inside a second plastic bag, also squeezing the air out and sealing tightly.
- Put the bag in the municipal garbage trash; not in the yard waste.

- Do not compost these plants.
- If you planted the seeds in containers, wash out the containers with soap and water to remove any remaining dirt. Do this over a sink or container that can catch the run-off. Put the run-off down the drain or flush down a toilet.
- Soak the clean container in a 10% bleach and water solution (1 part bleach to 9 parts water) for 30 minutes.

As gardeners it is important that we recognize that it can be risky buying plants, seeds, and other plant products online. Some purchases require proper inspections and paperwork, such as permits or plant health certificates, and can be illegal without them. Contact APHIS State Health Plant Director <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/planthealth/ppq-program-overview/sphd/california> before buying seeds or plants online from international vendors to determine if the items you are ordering need to be inspected or meet other conditions to bring them into the United States and California.

Sources:

United States Department of Agriculture, animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
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