

I've been absorbed in necessary paperwork this morning. But, in this case, instead of being deadly boring, as I find most bookkeeping tasks and farm business paper issues, this job is always one of my favorites, though it can end up being more expensive than I originally thought.

Even though the ground is white and the temperatures are not above freezing, this is the time our thoughts turn to the spring garden. Because, it is time to order our vegetable and flower seeds.

Our preferred seed company, from which we purchase our garden seeds, is a cooperative. We are members of this Maine-based co-op, and we get a small discount on seeds for our support. The benefits of buying our seeds from Fedco are several.

First, they offer a huge variety of all the vegetables we grow. They also sell small packets at a generally lower price than other companies—though cost has risen the past couple of years. And, there is no excess “fluff” in the form of colored pictures and glossy paper in the catalog. There is, though, a lot of interesting and informative commentary, some from the folks at Fedco who have eaten and/or trialed certain varieties, some from seed growers, some from customers. This discussion is valuable in selecting varieties. It also makes the catalog preferred reading matter, even though it is black and white newsprint. The art work, though, is outstanding and often humorous. On page 123 this year, for example, there is a drawing of a hand garden cultivator, but the shovels have been replaced by carrots. And, in the section of the catalog devoted to herbs, a drawing of a cat, in ecstasy with a pawful of catnip, adorns the lower portion of the page.

Another unusual feature of the Fedco catalog is the “number system” that tells the customer a little about who grew the seeds. Number 1 indicates that the seed was grown by small farmers, including Fedco staff. 2 shows that the seed came from family-owned companies or cooperatives, domestic or foreign. Seeds with the designation 3 were produced by domestic and foreign corporations not part of a larger conglomerate. Seeds with a 4 after their description were grown by multi-nationals not known by the company to be engaging in genetic engineering. 5 is the number for seeds produced by companies engaged in genetic engineering. And 6 is the number given to seeds sold by Syngenta, a manufacturer of neonicotinoids. For ethical reasons, we restrict our garden seeds to 1, 2, or 3. If we could, we would purchase all seeds that were 1s.

We have our old favorites that supply our garden with seeds to grow enough crops to feed us all year long. I'm sure many people would be appalled at the money we spend on garden seeds. But, I am sure that most of these folks don't see the garden—and, later in the year—the freezer, fruit cellar, and root cellar, as the “grocery store.” We do and don't need much from those usual establishments.

We also choose some new-to-us vegetables to plant each year. As I have been making our order for this year's seeds, these are some of the new items we will enjoy growing: white Russian kale, Sensation melons, Glacier Rose shallots, Violet Sparkle peppers, and three potato varieties we have not had

before; Algonquin, Strawberry Paw, and Bintje. It is always fun to try seeds and crops that are new to us. Some do well; some do not, or don't fill a special niche in our pantry. But, every year, from ordering seeds in January to enjoying all year the foods we have grown here at home, the garden is not far from our thoughts. Our lives depend on it.