

A lady we used to know loved to look at catalogs. She could sit for a whole evening dreaming about the contents of what some people still call “wish books.” She was thinking about what she would just love to buy. Clothes, gifts, jewelry, probably even holiday fruitcakes—her mission was to catalog shop. She wasn’t stingy or self-centered. If she had been able to buy everything she admired, she’d probably have given most of it away. But, her comment as she sighed and closed the catalog always struck me—“Don’t you wish you had a wheelbarrow full of money to spend?” My answer, silently said to myself, was, “No, I don’t.”

Another neighbor, this man a longtime bachelor, had a saying that struck me as being much more in keeping with our views: “It’s not most people’s needs that get them in trouble; it’s their wants.”

So, one might think that the many catalogs that arrive in the mailbox here would make a short trip to the recycling bin without ever reaching the house.

That was a very accurate description of the situation here. Or, it was until yesterday. Bent on discarding the bunch of colorful, slick paper catalogs, I almost missed that humble black and white newsprint specimen that was sandwiched between L.L. Bean and Signals. I pulled it out, and there it was, earlier than ever—the Fedco 2023 garden seed catalog!

So, I brewed a cup of tea, sat down with the catalog in my hand, and proceeded to slowly turn the pages, completely absorbed in a catalog, but not the glossy, colorful, slick kind. This black and white, artfully illustrated volume of seeds for sale enticed me instead with words and wonderful drawings.

The names of the vegetable varieties for sale sound like melodies and create a harmonious whole. Who would not be enchanted when meeting Imperial Star—not a monarch, just an artichoke.

There are others of royal blood on the pages, too: Royal Burgundy bean; King of the Early dry bean; and another ruler, King of the Garden lima bean. Green King broccoli is here; Snow Crown cauliflower; Monarch celeriac; Black King eggplant; Good King Henry greens. King Richard and King Sieg, as well as Lancelot, rule in the leek kingdom. We find King of the North Pepper; Table Queen squash; Plum Royal paste tomato; Pink Princess tomato; Princess Mix Asters; Queen Sophia Marigold; Empress of India nasturtium; Lemon Queen sunflower; and Black Knight sweet pea.

Plant names illustrate world geography as well: Vermont cranberry bean; Maine Sunset bean; Kentucky Wonder bean; Detroit Dark Red beet; Early Jersey Wakefield cabbage; Istanbul carrot; Narvik carrot; Yellowstone carrot and corn; Japanese hullless popcorn; Pennsylvania Dutch butter flavored popcorn; Tennessee Dancing gourd; New Zealand spinach; Tokyo Bekana Chinese cabbage; Siberian kale; Australian yellow lettuce; Pride of Wisconsin muskmelon; Sweet Dakota Rose watermelon; Walla Walla sweet Spanish onion; New York early onion; Dakota Tears onion; Oregon Giant snow pea; Odessa Machel pepper; Bolduc Hungarian spice pepper; Bulgarian chili pepper; New England Long Pie pumpkin; Oregon Spring tomato; Pink Berkeley tie-dyed tomato; Sheboygan organic tomato—and on and on and on. A reader or a catalog lover can spend an entire evening just savoring the names of the varieties in Fedco.

At least another evening is necessary to look at the art work in the catalog. On page 66 a skunk shows interest in a Benning's Green Tint patty pan squash. An elephant on roller skates (all four feet) is carrying away a big broccoli plant on page 16. A watermelon turned swimming pool adorns page 50. And on page 46 a sheep in gardening clothes is planting lettuce. Every page has illustrations.

So, I haven't even come to the serious catalog shopping. That will occur very soon, though, in hopes that none of our favorite varieties will already be sold out.

And the best part is that, though garden seeds are not cheap, I don't need a wheelbarrow full of money to pay for that small box of seed packets that will arrive in our mailbox on some snowy winter day to provide the beginnings of the garden that feeds us year round.