

Features

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Finding Joy in a Seed

Jennifer Polanz

I love how Judy Seaborn, co-owner and president of Botanical Interests, described the seed packet industry over the past two years.

"Of course 2020 was crazy and it was just very heartening to hear how many people found joy in their gardens amongst the craziness of COVID," she says. "And then came back to it this year."

In a nutshell, that describes where we're at with seed packet sales: craziness. The pandemic set up a rush to buy edible plants that didn't abate last winter when consumers bought seeds like they would go out of stock (which they then did). The demand was so great it taxed the seed providers to secure the amount of seed needed, with availability all over the place late last winter. So what does it look like this year?

"The demand is there—people who garden and retailers who normally would have waited until December or January are ordering now," says Renee Shepherd, owner of Renee's Garden. "People are understanding the supply system crisis and ... are wanting to get their seeds in time for the spring season."

The Supply Chain (What Else?)

Any story we write has a supply chain element these days and seed packets are no exception. "The supply chain problems are about the same as everybody else," Renee says. "Placing an order and waiting for it to get shipped."

Her company sources seeds from all over the world, including places in Europe and South America, and since everyone is trying to get more inventory, those orders were bigger and more inclined to be coming in shipments that are getting slowed down, she says. Organic seeds in particular may be harder to get this year, she adds, because there aren't as many suppliers for those as there are for traditional seeds.

Then there's the ancillary products that go with seed packet sales, like corrugated cardboard and metal products for display stands. Judy says, too, the paper company they work with talked about a potential paper shortage, too, which would affect the packaging.

"We have lots of packets on order, and they have delays there because they have labor shortages as well, and transportation times are longer."

The Positives

OK, enough of the bad—what about the positives? Retailers are seeing more demand for seeds and all the accessories that go with seed starting (of which there can be many, from lighting and heating to starting kits, soils, spray bottles, labels—you name it).

“We’ve been able to convert a lot of our stores to carrying seed all year,” adds Judy. “They’re finding they can sell seed more months out of the year.”

She noticed, too, that retailers were showcasing the seed packets in color-coordinated themes for the flowers or the fruit and vegetables inside: white pots, white gloves, white statuary and seed packets with white flowers, for example. So she created table-top displays with seven different color schemes to help retailers accomplish the color-blocked look.

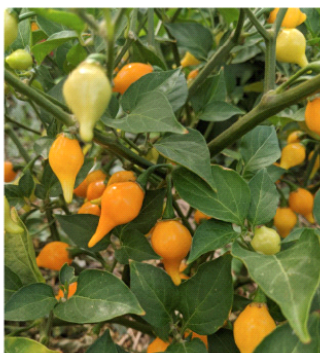
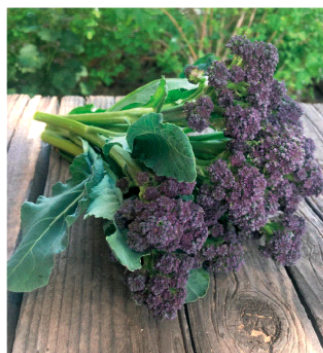
Both Judy and Renee say there’s an opportunity for holiday sales of seeds, too, along with starter-kits, pots and other accessories that help grow seeds in the winter (which, let me tell you, can be a fun little distraction during a dismal, gray February in Cleveland). Don’t forget that seed packets fit perfectly into stockings or on top of presents as a fun take on gift tags.

What’s New & Trending

What’s really interesting is the slight shift that’s taken place in seed packet purchases. Of course, edibles are still on top, but both Judy and Renee said they saw a surge in flower packet sales.

“That’s the difference between the first two years of the pandemic,” Renee says, noting the first year was heavy on fruits and vegetables. “Flowers are beginning to gain interest because of attracting honeybees and other pollinators.”

Judy also saw customers trending toward flowers. “They love their gardens now and find joy there. We did find in 2020 it was heavily the vegetables,” she says, noting once they got their veggies in they needed flowers to attract the pollinators. “But the last season we found the vegetables were still very strong and grew, but the flowers also picked up.”



New Seeds for 2022

I asked both Judy Seaborn of Botanical Interests and Renee Shepherd of Renee’s Seeds to highlight a couple of new edibles for 2022. They did not disappoint!

From Botanical Interests:

- Burgundy Broccoli shows off beautiful purple heads, first a main and then smaller offshoots, that are flavorful. Best of all, it grows in a wide range of temperatures, making it easier to grow.
- Red and Yellow Biquinho Chili Pepper starts with green fruit that ripen to red or yellow and provide a tangy, sweet and smoky taste with a touch of heat. Pronounced “bee-KEE-nyo”, these peppers can be pickled, served as an appetizer or used to garnish a drink.

From Renee’s Seeds:

- Yard Long Noodle King is a nearly 18-in. long green bean (18 inches!) that’s perfect for Asian-inspired recipes. Easy to grow, it’s a variety they’ve had success trialing all over the U.S.

- Rainbow Jalapeño Chiles Spice Trio start green and then ripen up to a mix of golden yellow, deep orange and rich red. They're juicy, crunchy and full of spice. **GP**