

## Features

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## Packed With Potential

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In late March 2020, an article ran in *The Washington Post*\* with the headline, “An onslaught of orders engulfs seed companies amidst coronavirus fears” and from all reports this was no exaggeration, as packet seed companies, online stores and garden centers ran fast and furious to fill orders this spring, often facing shortages, backorders and delivery delays. While we’re still experiencing a pandemic and things are far from normal, our sights shift ahead to next spring and what to expect as it pertains to packet seeds and demand from shoppers.

### Hot Picks

Here are some of the top-selling seed varieties from a couple of prominent seed packet producers in the industry:

**Botanical Interests**—Basil Italian Genovese; Cilantro/Coriander; Spinach Bloomsdale; Lettuce Butterhead Buttercrunch; Pea Snap Sugar Snap (note, all of these are organic varieties)

**Burpee**—Roma Tomato; Burpee Stringless Green Pod Beans; Fordhook Zucchini Summer Squash; Mammoth Sunflower

**Ferry-Morse**—Red Cherry Large-Fruited Tomato; Organic Spinach Bloomsdale; Evergreen Bunching Organic Onion; Straight 8 Cucumber; Sweetie Organic Tomato



*Pictured: Cucumber Straight 8, an All-America Selections Winner from 1935, is still a fan favorite.*

### Many Causes

As North America began to realize shelter-in-place rules were going to become a reality, millions of people decided to plant “pandemic gardens.” The much more positive term “Victory Garden 2.0” was promoted by groups like the National Garden Bureau and the media jumped on it as a positive story. Our industry was proud to be considered essential and embraced the concept. Kids taking part in online learning

often saw science teachers assign garden projects, as well. Another issue some feared was food security or even simply an inability to go shop for produce. Thus, everyone wanted vegetable seeds. They jumped online to order and headed to local garden centers and hardware stores to stock up.

Seed companies are no different than other businesses, and projecting sales is how to stay within budgetary constraints and plan expenses. So, when the tremendous (and unexpected) demand hit this spring, there just wasn't enough seed in the bag to fill orders as quickly as in normal times. And to compound the issue, protocols meant that fewer workers could be onsite to pick and ship orders, and shipping carriers were facing similar challenges. Subsequently, some seed companies temporarily closed ordering during the season simply to get caught up on existing demands.

## A Few Details

We caught up with Judy Seaborn, co-owner of Botanical Interests, a packet seed company with more than 600 varieties, including heirlooms and certified-organic seed, to share some numbers.

"When COVID-19 sent everyone back into their homes, we feel it accelerated an existing trend into gardening," she says. "April was peak for online with a 400+% increase in sales. In-store sales peaked around May with an increase of about 140%."

As expected, vegetables were in highest demand due to some of the causes listed above and shortages of popular varieties ran rampant. But most reports from seed companies and retailers indicate that substitutions were available, and few shoppers left without enough seeds to get gardens off to a good start.

"The biggest sellers were organic vegetables, by far," Judy says. "And from my experience, growing my own vegetables meant I mostly ate out of my own pantry, so I didn't have to go to the grocery store as frequently for perishable items."

## Looking Forward and a Challenge

As the seasons change and fall begins, demand hasn't subsided, and online and in-store sales of garden seeds continue to be strong. Cool-season crops have been planted, and old and new gardeners will soon begin to reap the harvest.

An exciting way to think about the seed packet "onslaught" is to consider what it means for next spring and beyond. It also means you need to order early and possibly increase your offerings to meet the demands of all of the new gardeners born out of the pandemic.

Judy advises garden centers to get seed orders in as soon as possible. "We are already receiving orders from stores," she adds.

In addition to growth in new gardeners, the pandemic is also creating a much-reported shift in where people live and work. Every day, there's a story about folks moving from crowded urban areas to more rural and suburban settings, and work-from-home situations are clearly on the rise. This bodes well for home gardens.

"More space means more room to garden!" Judy says. "I don't anticipate interest in the seed-gardening lifestyle to wane this coming season."

At *Green Profit*, we tend to agree and encourage you to take this opportunity to remind as many people as possible that #gardeningisessential, as well as healthy and fun. Let's work together to leverage increased interest into life-long gardening passion. And for many, this will start with a seed pack. **GP**