



**Haddam Garden Club**

January 2020 Garden Blog Article

by Terry Twigg

## January Dreams

The start of a new year is, traditionally, a time for New Year's resolutions. Waking late on January first, possibly a wee bit hung over, nevertheless we approach the year with renewed determination to change things for the better. We're going to lose ten pounds, finally clear out that basement, always remember to bring our own bags into the grocery store. All things are possible.

For gardeners, though, New Year's resolutions are found in the pages of [seed catalogs](#). Last year's drought or rain, weeds, pests, and summer heat are forgotten. For us, this is the year we'll finally venture beyond tomatoes to a real vegetable garden. (With kale! And herbs!) Flower borders will have something in bloom every single week, with no boring downtime, and they'll be perfectly color-coordinated. Whatever a garden is today is only the beginning of what it will become. This year, we fondly imagine, the gardens in our yards will finally surpass the ones in our heads.

And so to the catalogs. You may begin with a plan, guided by last year's notes about what bloomed when, what clashed with that purple shrub, which plants the aphids ate. Or you may abandon yourself to the seduction of gorgeous photos of plants which, improbably, appear to grow to maturity almost overnight, bloom without pausing for breath until frost, and then obligingly tidy themselves away for winter. Either way, you're going to end up with more seeds than windowsills to accommodate them.

A few suggestions to keep in mind as you choose:

First, crack the seed catalog code. Seed company hype puts realtors to shame:

--"Vigorous" or "spreads easily" mean you'd better plant this in a wild corner or resign yourself to digging volunteers out of garden beds until the end of time. These descriptions may even be indicators of an invasive plant, which some companies, unburdened by scruples, continue to sell.

--"Cannot ship to states X, Y and Z" also may be a clue to a problem plant, even if our state hasn't yet gotten around to banning it. If X, Y or Z is a Northeastern state, think twice.

--"Mulch heavily" means you're rolling the dice, and it may not survive a harsh winter.

--"Nothing bothers it." This one is particularly insidious. Another way of phrasing it is, "Not one of our native insects is able to use this plant for food."

Make sure some of your choices are [native plants](#). They co-evolved with our native insects, birds and animals and are their first choice—sometimes, their only choice—for food. Beauties like goldenrod, cardinal flower, or woodland phlox rival any showy import, and since they're perfectly adapted to our soil and climate, they are more likely to thrive with a minimum of care.

If you're trying to encourage pollinators, you want something in bloom from earliest spring until the winter solstice. Daisy-shaped flowers are usually the best bet: Did you know that the more petals a flower has, the less value it's likely to have as a pollen source? That's because double flowers often got that way by converting stamens (the pollen-producing male part of the flower) into extra petals. If all have been converted, no pollen can be produced. Even if the plant is still producing some pollen, too many petals may block access.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't plant big fluffy flowers. I do; I can't imagine a garden without old roses, sumptuous peonies, or over-the-top dahlias. But plant the single varieties too, not too far away, so insects enticed by the glamour girls can find their way to easier meals. One advantage of life in our small town is that most of us have enough room to grow our old favorites and still have space to help sustain the circle of life.

When choosing vegetables to grow from seed, I follow three rules. First: if you don't like to eat it, don't bother growing it. Second: if you want to avoid spraying poison on your food, look for varieties noted for their disease resistance. This might be natural—it's how some prized heirloom varieties got their reputation—or a result of hybridization. Either way, you'll end up with a better crop. Third: Have fun! I want purple carrots, blue squash, rainbow chard, and pink popcorn. I want melons so big I can barely lift them, and salad greens I can't even pronounce. I want to grow black tomatoes, bright yellow pear tomatoes, and oh, do I want striped Green Zebra tomatoes, which make the best grilled cheese and tomato sandwiches ever. What I don't want is to grow the same boring varieties I'll find at every market next summer.

My New Year's resolution: This year's will be my best garden ever, even though (maybe even because) it will end up looking nothing like the imaginary garden that grows in a cold January. Some plants, like the dark red Cherry Brandy rudbeckia I tried last year, I will grow again and again, while others, like the supposed-to-be-red-but-really-a-drab-brown Velvet Queen sunflowers, will be consigned to the compost pile. It's not a failure; it's an experiment. I will learn. I will grow. I will garden.