
New Hampshire
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Buying Packaged Garden Seeds

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With the longer days and warmer sun of March, gardeners are awakening from their winter doldrums and thinking of planting time again. Garden centers and hardware stores are stocked with racks of seed packets.

Gardeners need to consider several things when buying seed packets for vegetable and flower gardens to assure good value and satisfaction. State and Federal seed laws require certain information to be marked on seed packets that is intended to provide consumers with basic information.

Seed packets must state the kind and variety of the seed. For example, Sweet Bell Pepper is the “kind” and Ace is the “variety,” a hybrid, sometimes identified with the F1 symbol. “Kind” means one or more related species or subspecies which are known by one common name. A “Variety” is a subdivision of a kind, which is distinct, uniform and stable.

There are many hundreds of named varieties of vegetable seeds in existence. Usually, seed companies will choose to offer the varieties that have the best characteristics for growers in their marketing area. In addition to the culinary attributes and appearance of a variety, the other important variety selection consideration, especially for short season regions like New Hampshire, is the maturity. Most seed packets will indicate how many days from planting are required under average or better growing conditions for the crop to be ready to pick.

Seed production today has become a highly specialized global business. Most seed companies are primarily distributors, sourcing seeds from around the world which they package and market. Other seed companies may produce certain varieties that they specialize in, but generally a seed company’s geographic location has little relationship to where the seeds were originally grown.

Seed packets are required by law to state the quantity of the contents. Quantity may be stated as either net weight or seed count. Look carefully at the printed quantity of different brands of seed packets to see which has the better quantity to price ratio. Some brands price all packets the same, whether hybrid or non-hybrid, but provide less seed in the hybrid packets.

Seed count labeling is self-evident, but when packets show net weight stated in grams or ounces or fractions thereof, consumers get little indication of how many seeds are present, especially with small-seeded kinds like carrots or peppers. Sometimes labels state that a packet plants a certain number of feet of row if seeds are placed at the spacing given in the instructions.

Another important label requirement is the packed for year, such as “Packed for 2006” or the date the seed was tested for germination. A lot number is also required as well as the name and address of the labeling company. If seeds are chemically treated, such as with a fungicide to prevent decay in cool, wet soil, the presence and name of the pesticide must be clearly stated.

For more information on this topic and others, contact the Division of Regulatory Services, NH Dept. of Agriculture, and Markets & Food at tel. (603) 271-3685, registrations@agr.nh.gov or visit the website at www.agriculture.nh.gov.