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## Seeds: Burpee catalogs mailed out early this year

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Published Saturday, Jan. 14, 2012

Local gardeners got a jump start on their 2012 summer harvest with the early arrival of a perennial favorite, the Burpee catalog.

"We sent out an early mailing – something we've never done before," said W. Atlee Burpee & Co. Chairman George Ball in a phone interview from his Pennsylvania headquarters.

Along with that catalog came a new opportunity: Burpee – the nation's largest shipper of live plants – is finally mailing transplants to California.

"When it comes to plants by mail, Burpee is No. 1 – except for California," Ball said. "We've always sent lots and lots of seed to California, but now we can send all our transplants, too. So, this catalog is our coming-out debut."

Burpee fulfilled California's rigorous regulations to ensure that any plants headed into the Golden State will be free of pests and disease, Ball explained.

"These rules were designed to protect the biggest garden in the world – California's interior valley," Ball said. "It's the best agricultural real estate on the planet, from Sacramento on down. State officials are vigilant about importing anything. But we finally got approval."

While Burpee offers thousands of seed varieties, it stocks about 200 kinds of transplants. The biggest sellers: tomatoes and herbs.

"Tomatoes are our bread and butter," Ball said. "While you may find a few different ones at a local nursery, we ship more than 50 varieties of tomato transplants.

"Herbs are really flying out, too," he added. "We've seen that trend for about two years. Parsley is always No. 1 (in sales). Why? The difference between home-grown and store-bought parsley is as different as home-grown and supermarket tomatoes – there's no comparison. But basil and thyme are popular, too."

That early mailing brought immediate feedback from Burpee's legion of loyal customers.

"You never know what's going to hit, but we've already seen some surprises," Ball said. "I never expected a jalapeño to be a big seller its first year, but the Big Guy jalapeño is an instant hit. That name helps."

Also catching on with catchy names are Golden Egg summer squash (which looks just like its descriptive title) and Easy Peasy garden peas (a taste test winner).

Judging by early orders, Burpee has another tomato star in the making: Big Daddy.

"It's the clear winner by far among our new introductions," Ball said. "It's a really nice tomato."

Big Daddy was developed by Paul Thomas of Woodland, a retired hybridizer who still keeps his hand in the greenhouse. Big Daddy – which produces abundant, globular 15-ounce fruit – is an improved descendant of the classic hybrid Big Boy.

Big Daddy "offers more disease resistance than Big Boy," Ball said. "People's eyes tend to glaze over when you mention disease resistance, but plant health benefits everything – taste, quality, yield, earliness and length of harvest."

With those advantages, Big Daddy also should be easier to grow.

Other new tomatoes with something extra are Power Pops (double the lycopene), Solar Power (three times the beta carotene) and Cherry Punch (30 percent more vitamin C). All are part of Burpee's Boost collection, vegetables naturally bred for more antioxidants and nutritional content.

"People want more nutritious vegetables," Ball said. "For aging baby boomers and mothers of young children, that's a big concern. These varieties have up to three times the nutrients without sacrificing flavor."

In addition to its many vegetables in the 2012 catalog, Burpee also some unusual flowers. Among this year's highlights: First Yellow geranium (the world's first in that elusive color) and a real throwback, Flame Thrower nasturtium (a split-petaled heirloom variety first introduced by Burpee in 1903).

"What comes around goes around," Ball said. "Flame Thrower was amazingly popular in its day. With interest in heirlooms, it's being rediscovered. It's pretty sensational. And Sacramento is fantastic for nasturtiums."

Just like tomatoes.

## CATALOG TIME

January starts catalog season, when winter-weary gardeners start dreaming of spring and summer – and flowers and vegetables to come.

Whether you just browse websites or order your own catalogs, there's a lot of inspiration to be found. To get started, here are some favorite sources for seeds and more:

- Burpee: Granddaddy of America's garden catalogs, this resource celebrates its 137th birthday with more than 150 new varieties. [www.burpee.com](http://www.burpee.com) or (800) 888-1447.
- Peaceful Valley Farm & Garden Supply: This Grass Valley company is the go-to source for organic seedstock and bare-root fruit trees. [www.groworganic.com](http://www.groworganic.com) or (888) 784-1722.
- Stark Bro's: This historic Missouri nursery has grown fruit trees for almost two centuries. It offers unusual apple varieties such as Blondee, Cinnamon Crisp and Ginger Gold. [www.starkbros.com](http://www.starkbros.com) or (800) 325-4180.
- Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds: This company specializes in unusual vegetable and flower varieties, many dating back generations. [www.rareseeds.com](http://www.rareseeds.com) or (707) 773-1336.
- Renee's Garden: This Santa Cruz County company always has a tempting menu of gourmet veggies, including several blends. [www.reneesgarden.com](http://www.reneesgarden.com) or (888) 880-7228.

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