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2012 seed catalogue review

By [Barbara Damrosch](#), Published: January 11

If the print medium has died, why do seed catalogues still litter our desks and coffee tables in healthy numbers? Here's why.

The Web is great for finding exactly what you want — say, a medium-sized, early-ripening, red sweet pepper — but catalogues tell you what you don't know you want, which is much more fun. They are their own mixed-up minestrone of fact, fiction, science, art, history and anthropology. Wander through them and each will catch you in its seductive net.

[Burpee](#), that good old American standard, loves to ride in on the newest wave. Its “Boost” collection, which features veggies high in antioxidants, includes a Healing Hands salad mix, with “nutritional oomph.” In it, four greens are combined not just in one seed packet but in a single seed pellet. Burpee also owns the catalogue [Cook's Garden](#), a more style-conscious venture whose cover features the hot item for 2012: a two-inch sweet pepper called Cherry Stuffer. It makes a cute hors d'oeuvre, and I might buy it. See? Here I go.

Leafing through is the only way you can shop with the large-format, old-timey [Schumway](#) catalogue, because there is no index. And how else would you stumble on its kitchen [compost bucket](#) painted to look like a lettuce? [Seeds From Italy](#), which distributes the excellent Franchi seed line, has been taken over by Kansas farmers Dan Nagengast and Lynn Byczynski. I loved the text penned by Bill McKay, the former owner, but now I can view the photos without a magnifying glass. Plus there's a polenta corn with orange kernels on Page 41, and soaps with vegetable extracts such as tomato and cucumber.

The heirloom market is still well served by [Seed Savers'](#) and [Baker Creek's](#) catalogues, the first one elegant, the second a cross between "Little House on the Prairie" and the Grand Ole Opry. Baker Creek's wonderfully eclectic collection (16 sorghums!) is interspersed with family photos, thought-provoking quotes and veggies that look as if they came from a real person's garden, with blemishes and a little real soil on 'em.

Line art varies from the graceful drawings in John Scheepers [Kitchen Garden Seeds](#) to the old engravings manipulated in [Fedco's](#) thick book, so that a kneeling woman weeps next to a giant cut onion, a cricket batter swats at a cuke beetle, and a tree-like carrot is sliced with a two-man saw. The Multicolored Pole Bean Mix is high on my list.

I also appreciate the horticultural expertise shown by catalogues that cater in large part to farmers, such as [Johnny's Selected Seeds](#) and [High Mowing](#). I especially like High Mowing's [staff photo](#), which could be a recruiting poster for the [Young Farmer](#) movement. Its robust crew, each posed with a scarlet poppy, stands "Sgt. Pepper"-style behind a bank of bushy little green plants. Where's that magnifying glass? Could that be marijuana? Youth's honor rests unsullied. It's basil.

Damrosch is a freelance writer and the author of "[The Garden Primer](#)."

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