

Tips on reading seed packets

Some terms are easier to understand than others

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Master Gardener

Question: I have been gardening for a few years now, but I am never quite sure how to decipher all the information on the back of seed packets. What does the gardening terminology mean and what should I keep in mind as I read the back of the seed packets?

Answer: Both the front and the back of those small seed packets are loaded with valuable information. If you take the time to understand the terminology, you will be more successful when it comes to planning what actually goes into your garden and when.

Take the time to read the fine print, and either ask questions of experienced gardeners, call the seed company or go to its website to get your questions answered. It is a smart idea to save the seed packet after sowing for future reference.

Many pieces of information are easy to understand. Each seed packet will have either a picture or an illustration of the plant along with the common name, and sometimes, the Latin name. Directions on when to plant are described.

Direct sow means that you should plant outside in the ground after all danger of frost has passed. For the Roseburg area, the last frost date is generally April 3. Or it will say that you can start the seeds indoors and then transplant outdoors after all danger of frost. The term hardy means plants can withstand frost, while tender means plants cannot withstand frost.



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Most seed packets will give very specific seed depth information, sometimes along with an illustration, but the general rule of thumb is that you plant no deeper than a seed's diameter. Pay attention to the spacing requirements and the height and spread of the plant at maturity. Read closely to determine if the plant is giant or dwarf. This information will help you plant a successful garden that is not overcrowded, thus preventing plants from competing for the same nutrients. It will also help you plan out a garden that is visually attractive.

Days to germination will tell you how many days you have to wait for the plant to finally poke its little green head out for the world to see. The seed packet may tell you the germination percentage, which refers to the number of seeds that will produce plants under ideal conditions. If you start seeds indoors in flats under ideal conditions, count on a slightly higher germination rate than if sowing directly outdoors.

For your plants to reach the very best performance, note the light requirements. Full-sun plants do best with six hours of morning sun. If the package says the seeds can tolerate shade, this means they will do best in sun but will grow in shade as well.

The terms hybrid (F1 or F2) and open-pollinated (OP) may be a bit confusing. These refer

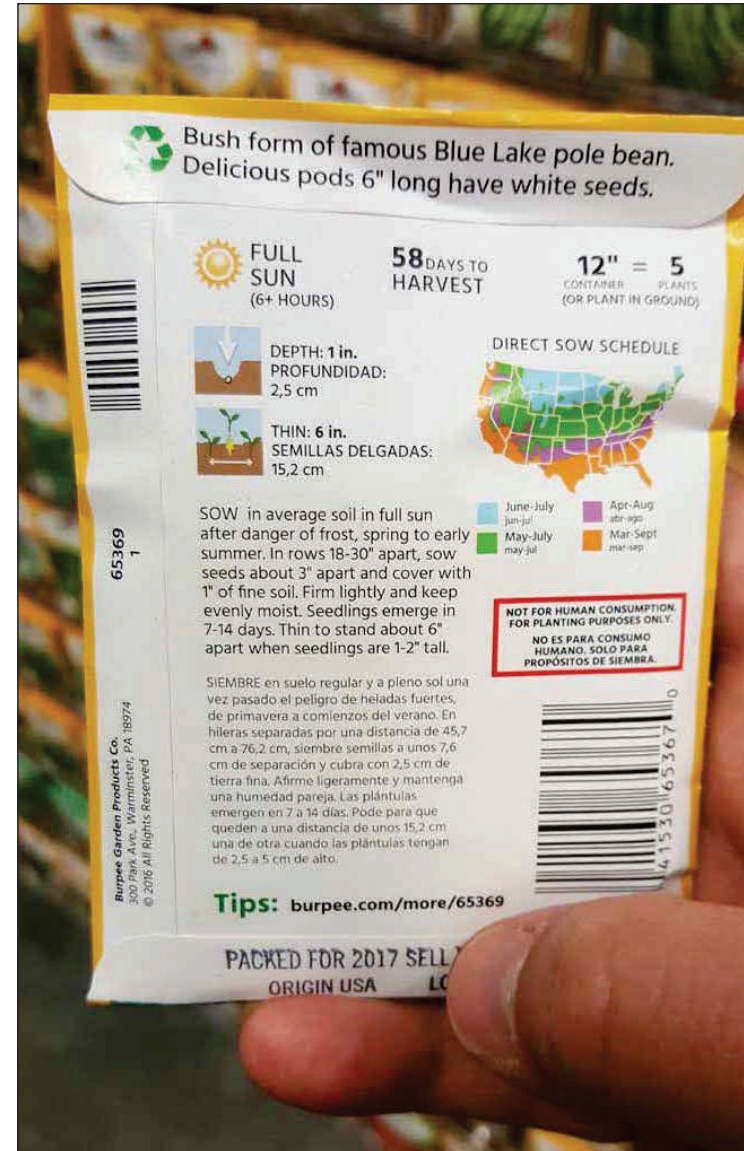


PHOTO BY NAPA MASTER GARDENERS

Both the back and front of seed packets are loaded with information needed to properly germinate seeds.

to two basic types of seed. Hybrid seeds are created in a carefully controlled environment by deliberately crossing the pollen of different parents of the same species. You will not want to save the seeds from your mature produce with the intent of planting next season because the seeds will not be true to their parentage.

Open-pollinated seeds are formed when the pollen of the same species is carried by

wind, insects, or intervention. Seeds from the mature fruit can be saved and planted next season, and these second-generation plants will be the same as their parents unless there was cross-pollination from different varieties to interfere.

And last, heirloom refers to a variety that has a long history that dates back at least 50 years. They are open-pollinated and have been saved and handed down through many



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generations. Some say that heirloom vegetables have superior taste and are more unique. One downside of heirloom varieties is their lack of disease resistance compared to modern vegetable cultivars.

The last bit of wisdom I would like to share is to buy high-quality seeds with an expiration date that shows the current year. If you go to all the trouble of preparing and caring for a garden, you need to start with seeds that are fresh.

Hopefully, this information has cleared up a few areas of confusion. May you have a successful and rewarding gardening season.

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE