



MOTHER EARTH NEWS

Best Vegetable Seed Companies

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Finding sustainable seed companies that sell high-quality seeds and provide detailed varietal information is a top priority for many gardeners.

PHOTO: SAXON HOLT

By the time you poke your first seeds into the ground each spring, you already have huge hopes for the success of your crops. You've spent hours planning, weeks waiting, and your soil may reflect years of hard work spent building its fertility. With so much potential in those seeds, you want to buy from a seed company you can trust. So how do you know which have the best seeds and selections? And which follow sustainable practices?

To answer these questions, we asked hundreds of gardeners to take our 2011 Seed Company Survey. Our survey group was a well-seasoned bunch: About 65 percent had grown food gardens for more than 10 years. Each respondent picked his or her three favorite vegetable seed companies and then ranked companies based on individual qualities. Ultimately, the survey revealed 15 standout vegetable seed companies, all of which emphasize sustainability. (Join our [Gardening Advisory Group](#) to take future surveys.)

Top 15 Sustainable Seed Companies

Our Top 15 list (toward the end of this article) is based on how often the vegetable seed companies were ranked in gardeners' top three. For our survey takers, it wasn't just about the seeds. In addition to an array of varieties with consistently high germination rates, they wanted seed companies that provide detailed variety descriptions, growing advice and interesting stories. Genetic integrity was also a top priority. The gardeners we surveyed were deeply concerned about genetically modified (GM) food crops, so we made sure all of the companies here have signed the Safe Seed Pledge — a written commitment to sell only non-GM seed — or made public declarations that they will not knowingly sell GM seeds.

Many gardeners said they didn't know there were more than 100 mail-order seed and plant companies. You can find a national list in our [Directory of Companies Offering Mail-Order Seeds and Plants](#).

Superior ratings in multiple categories put [Johnny's Selected Seeds](#), a company that offers heirlooms, organics and hybrids, in the top spot. "The Johnny's catalog is accurate and informative without the hype, and I have never had a failed crop from their seed," wrote a Midwestern gardener with more than 20 years of experience. Others praised Johnny's "cool tools" and hard-to-find organic gardening supplies, and many said they liked doing business with an employee-owned company.

Gardeners want to support preservation of heirloom varieties, so [Seed Savers Exchange](#) received high marks for providing unique and nearly forgotten heirlooms. Seed Savers, a nonprofit organization, has "wonderful heirloom seed, a beautiful catalog and a great mission," wrote a Mid-Atlantic gardener who puts sustainability first. The Seed Savers catalog was rated highly for its variety descriptions and photographs, plus customers said they liked being a part of seed conservation. "They're outside of the mainstream, consolidated seed-production system, and they have a wonderful community feel to their operation and network," wrote an organic gardener in the Pacific Northwest.

A strong sense of purpose has earned [Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds](#) many loyal patrons. A prominent spokesman against GM "Frankenfoods," founder Jere Gettle has amassed a global selection of rare and worthwhile varieties. "What's not to love about Baker Creek?" wrote a Mid-Atlantic gardener. "They're making a hugely positive impact on the world. With all the GM seed obscenities going on, they're helping make sure humans will be able to eat in the future!"

Passions for ethical responsibility and high-quality seeds helped put [Seeds of Change](#), [High Mowing Seeds](#) and [Fedco Seeds](#) near the top of the list, too. Here's what some respondents had to say about them:

Seeds of Change: "Good combination of heirlooms, open-pollinated and quality hybrids, all organically grown."

"I find the agronomics information listed for each type of vegetable very helpful, and I like their emphasis on biodiversity and sustainability."

High Mowing Organic Seeds: "I love the personal service and wide variety of organic selections from

High Mowing.”

“The varieties they offer are excellent and suitable for organic market farming; everything is certified organic, which makes life easier if ordering seed for a certified organic farm.”

Fedco Seeds: “Excellent variety choice, and usually the cheapest prices. I like supporting a co-op, and Fedco offers information on where their seeds are from.”

Crazy for Seed Catalogs

Nearly 70 percent of gardeners said they buy most of their seeds from mail-order vegetable seed companies. Most gardeners were quick to heap praise on their favorite seed companies and their catalogs. Of Fedco, one gardener said, “Their catalog makes wonderful, entertaining, laugh-out-loud reading, and all of the vintage graphics are wonderful.”

Loco for Local Seeds

Most gardeners send at least one seed order to a local or regional company, and this practice offers certain benefits. For instance, locally grown seed is more likely to be suited to your climate. In the upper and mid-South, [Southern Exposure Seed Exchange](#) has a strong following. “I go here first,” said a Mid-Atlantic gardener. “Southern Exposure provides mostly locally grown seed, heritage and open-pollinated varieties, excellent service and decent prices.” Known for offering unique items, Southern Exposure Seed Exchange was called “a small company with a big heart” by a longtime organic farmer.

In the Northwest, [Territorial Seeds](#) reigned supreme as a regional seed source, with excellent ratings for producing catalogs brimming with varietal and cultural information. “They always have what I want in stock, so I don’t have to wait. The variety descriptions are excellent,” wrote a gardener with a small plot who’s just getting started. And Territorial Seed is successful nationally, too. “Territorial has good selection across the board, dependable seeds and fair pricing,” said a New England gardener. Additionally, Territorial is one of the only major seed companies that publishes a winter catalog, which is of tremendous interest to food gardeners in areas with mild winters.

Are We Having Fun Yet?

Gardeners of all skill levels enjoy trying new crops and varieties, and many look to mail-order seed companies to add to the adventure. “[Nichols Garden Nursery](#) always has something new and interesting, plus they continue to carry my old favorites,” said a veteran gardener from the Southwest. A Mid-Atlantic gardener noted, “The family warmth of Nichols shows in the care they take with each order, and they have taken a stand against treated and GMO seed.” A gardener from the Midwest with more than 20 years of experience summed it up this way: “When I’m looking for old-world heirlooms or just plain fun, Nichols Garden Nursery is my favorite.”

Those in search of undiscovered garden pleasures often find them in packets from [Renee’s Garden](#), which is also a valued source for garden-worthy annual flowers. “The Renee’s Garden catalog

introduced me to favorite new crops, including ‘Trombetta’ squash and ‘Garden Babies’ lettuce,” said an experienced gardener from the Southwest. A Midwestern gardener with 20 years of experience praised Renee’s “combo packs” that include three varieties of lettuce, squash, tomato or pepper.

The Top 15 Vegetable Seed Companies

1. [Johnny's Selected Seeds](#) (Winslow, Maine)
 2. [Seed Savers Exchange](#) (Decorah, Iowa)
 3. [Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds](#) (Mansfield, Mo.)
 4. [Burpee Seeds and Plants](#) (Warminster, Pa.)
 5. [Territorial Seed Company](#) (Cottage Grove, Ore.)
 6. [Seeds of Change](#) (Rancho Dominguez, Calif.)
 7. [Ferry-Morse Seed Company](#) (Fulton, Ky.)
 8. [Southern Exposure Seed Exchange](#) (Mineral, Va.)
 9. [High Mowing Organic Seeds](#) (Wolcott, Vt.)
 10. [Fedco Seeds](#) (Waterville, Maine)
 11. [Nichols Garden Nursery](#) (Albany, Ore.)
 12. [The Cook's Garden](#) (Warminster, Pa.)
 13. [Botanical Interests](#) (Broomfield, Colo.)
 14. [Renee's Garden Seeds](#) (Felton, Calif.)
 15. [Peaceful Valley Farm & Garden Supply](#) (Grass Valley, Calif.)
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Organic Seeds Off the Rack

One sour point for some seed shoppers was shipping cost, but you won't pay a cent if you pick up packets at retail stores you often visit. Even big-box stores now carry organic and heirloom seed from Burpee, Ferry-Morse, Cook's Garden and others, or you can look for more specialized selections at garden centers and health food stores. Food-minded gardeners may find racks from Renee's Garden at gift and gourmet shops. Food co-ops and independently owned health food stores often have displays from regional seed companies, such as Territorial in the West and Southern Exposure in the East. (Each company's website includes a store locator button.) Or, maybe you'll simply have to answer your doorbell: Renee's, Botanical Interests, John Scheeper's Kitchen Garden Seeds, Seeds of Change and other seed companies offer school fundraiser programs.