

# A Garden in the Mailbox

## Objective

Students will examine seed catalogs and find information about plants, growing seasons, etc.

## Background

In the gloomiest days of winter, beautiful flowers bloom and scrumptious vegetables grow in the mailboxes of gardeners all across the country. Mail order seed companies send out their new catalogs beginning in January. Although it is too cold to plant most of the seeds at that time, it's exactly the right time to start planning for spring. Most gardeners also like to get an early start by planting some seeds inside so they've already started to grow by the time it is warm enough to put them in the ground. Certain seeds can even be planted directly into the ground in winter to get an early start.

Seed catalogs are the most widely read garden books in the world. They contain beautiful pictures of a wide variety of plants and useful information about how to grow them. Some even offer recipes.

The first mail-order seed catalog was introduced in 1834. The artists who illustrated the early catalogs took great care to draw botanically-correct images. This was very important to the farmer, who paid in winter for the coming summer's harvest. If the size, shape or color of a vegetable or flower was misrepresented in the catalog, the farmer's livelihood might be jeopardized. Along with the new postal service, the mail order houses, and their reasonably priced seeds, made it possible for more people to plant flowers. Before then, only the wealthy could afford cut flowers in their homes.

Some seed companies that have been in business for a century or more include Ferry Morris Seeds, in business since 1856; Park Seeds, in business since 1868; and W. Atlee Burpee Seeds, in business since 1876.

Today most seed companies offer their catalogs online, but many gardeners still look forward to getting their catalogs in the mail to brighten cold days.

## English Language Arts

1. Read and discuss background.  
—Ask students if they have ever ordered anything through catalogs in the mail or online. Discuss.
2. Provide the list of seed catalogs included in this lesson.  
—Each student will write a letter to one of the companies requesting a free catalog.
3. After most of the seed catalogs have arrived, look through them as a class to see how they are organized. As an alternative to receiving catalogs by mail, students will search online for seed catalogs and

## Oklahoma Academic Standards

### GRADE 3

Speaking and Listening: R.1,2,3;  
W.1,2. Critical Reading and  
Writing: R.7; W.2,3. Research:  
R.1,2,3,4; W.1,2,3. Multimodal  
Literacies: R.1,2; W.1,2  
Geography: 1E  
Visual Art—Creating: 1,2.  
Connecting: 4

### GRADE 4

Speaking and Listening: R.1,2,3;  
W.1,2. Critical Reading and  
Writing: R.7; W.2. Research:  
R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3. Multimodal  
Literacies: R.1,2; W.1,2  
Geography: 3  
Visual Art—Creating: 1,2.  
Connecting: 4

### GRADE 5

Speaking and Listening:  
R.1,2,3; W.1,2. Critical Writing:  
2. Research: R.1,2,3; W.3,4.  
Multimodal Literacies: R.1,2;  
W.1,2  
Visual Art—Creating: 1,2.  
Connecting: 4

## Materials

seed catalogs  
fresh produce

## Free Seed Catalogs

Harris Seeds  
355 Paul Rd.  
PO Box 24966  
Rochester, NY 14624-0966  
www.harriseseeds.com

Johnny's Selected Seeds  
955 Benton Ave.  
Winslow, ME 04901  
www.johnnyseeds.com

Park Seed Co.  
1 Parkton Ave.  
Greenwood, SC 29647  
www.parkseed.com

W. Atlee Burpee & Co.  
300 Park Ave.  
Warminster, PA 18974  
www.burpee.com

Lorenz's OK Seeds  
<http://www.lorenzokseedsllc.com>

## Research Topics

History of seed catalogs

Importance of the US Postal  
Service to farmers in the  
19th Century

Seed catalog artists

Seed varieties

Difference between hybrid  
and heirloom seeds

complete the worksheet using online resources. Compare the physical catalogs with those found online. Which would be easier to use? Why?

—Hand out the worksheet included with this lesson.

—Students will use the seed catalogs to complete the worksheet.

4. Students will research, design, write and illustrate their own seed catalogs.

## Social Studies

1. Using the seed catalogs, show students how to find zone maps and determine the planting zone for your area.

—Discuss the importance of zone maps in deciding what to plant and when. (Different plants grow better under different weather conditions, and the grower must know when the first and last frost date is expected in his/her area.)

2. Discuss seed varieties.

—From the seed catalogs, students will read descriptions of plant varieties and discuss why growers offer more than one variety of the same flower or vegetable. (Some varieties grow better under different conditions.)

## Visual Art

1. Bring fruits and vegetables to class. Discuss this statement from the

Background:

“The artists who illustrated the early catalogs took great care to draw botanically correct images. This was very important to the farmer, who paid in winter for the coming summer's harvest. If the size, shape or color of a vegetable or flower was misrepresented in the catalog, the farmer's livelihood might be jeopardized.”

—Students will draw the fruits and vegetables with as much accuracy as possible—as though the farmer's livelihood might depend on their accuracy.

## Extra Reading

Burnie, David, *Plant*, Eyewitness Books, DK, 2011. Edom, Helen, *Science With Plants*, Usborne, 2007.

Juettner, Bonnie, *The Seed Vault*, Norwood House, 2009.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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Use seed catalogs to find the following information:

Name of catalog/company \_\_\_\_\_

Location of company \_\_\_\_\_

Write the names of three flower or vegetable varieties that are advertised as “new.”

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

How many varieties of tomatoes are listed in this catalog? \_\_\_\_\_ Of peppers? \_\_\_\_\_ Of zinnias? \_\_\_\_\_

Of sunflowers? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the cost of delivery? \_\_\_\_\_

Write the names of two plants that are listed as “heirloom” plants.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_

List three non-seed or plant items that are sold in this catalog. 1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

Choose one flower and one vegetable from the catalog, and fill in the following information for each.

## FLOWER

Common name of plant \_\_\_\_\_ Plant variety \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you choose this variety instead of other varieties? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ How many days does it take the plant to  
grow from planting to bloom? \_\_\_\_\_ Instructions for planting: \_\_\_\_\_

How many seeds are in a packet or what is the weight? \_\_\_\_\_ How much does it cost? \_\_\_\_\_

## VEGETABLE

Common name of plant \_\_\_\_\_ Plant variety \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you choose this variety instead of other varieties? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ How many days does it take the plant to  
grow from planting to bloom? \_\_\_\_\_ Instructions for planting: \_\_\_\_\_

How many seeds are in a packet or what is the weight? \_\_\_\_\_ How much does it cost? \_\_\_\_\_

Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom is a program of the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry and the Oklahoma State Department of Education.