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University of Kentucky
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HORTICULTURE EDUCATION

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Deciphering the Descriptions of Vegetables

Looking at the words and letters describing different vegetables in the seed catalogs and online seed information seems confusing. What do they mean? Why are they important to me? By understanding a few terms and using the catalog or online code definitions, the seemly secret characteristics of the plants are revealed. This information helps the gardener select varieties that will perform well in their garden and produce vegetables they will enjoy.

Look for the phrase “days to maturity”, which indicates the average number of days until the crop is ready to harvest, to determine when to plant the vegetable. Pay attention to determine if this refers to the length of time starting from planting seeds or planting transplants. Keep in mind the weather and growing conditions impact the actual harvest date. Earlier maturing varieties produce an early harvest in the spring and are used in a fall garden when the growing season is shorter to produce a crop before frost. Check to see if the seed needs to be planted after the threat of a frost so that plants coming up are not killed by a frost.

Also, look for the description of the plant size to fit the garden. “Patio” often means it grows in less space and is possibly suitable for containers. Look for plants best for raised beds or containers such as a variety of tomato, green bean, and sweet corn bred for growing in containers. Consider

growing a bush type of plant that usually has smaller fruit but takes up less space. However, consider the actual size of the plant in the description. It may still be too big for the available space.

When managing plant diseases, look for the terms “tolerant” or “resistant.” Tolerant means the plant endures the disease while still producing a crop. Resistance means the plant has the natural ability to prevent or slow disease development and still produce vegetables. With disease resistance, the need for organic or synthetic chemical management is reduced or possibly eliminated. Examples of disease resistance to look for in tomatoes are verticillium, often represented by a V, and fusarium, represented by an F. These two soil-borne diseases are only managed by disease resistance. A number after these letters indicates the disease resistance is against a specific race of the same organism which causes the disease.

Look for disease resistance to what is common in the area. For example, early blight is a common disease of tomatoes. Cultivars of cherry tomatoes with some resistance to early blight are ‘Jasper’, ‘Mountain Magic’, and Sungold (yellow). Slicing-size tomatoes with resistance to this disease are ‘Mountain Fresh Plus’, ‘Mountain Merit’, and ‘Stellar’. Check the description of the tomato varieties to see what disease resistance they carry.

“Treated seeds” indicates that a fungicide or insecticide is put on the seeds. This helps the seed grow without rotting from a soil-borne organism or prevents insect pests from damaging the seed or plant. Often the seed protectant material has a color, such as pink or green, signifying it is treated.

Other codes in the catalog are “F1” and “OP.” F1 is the first generation resulting from the cross-pollination of two specific parents. This hybrid cross results in offspring that are uniform and vigorous. Breeders use this method to naturally obtain resistance to certain diseases. If seeds from the F1 hybrids are saved and planted, the same variety characteristics as what was planted the first year

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would not be there. On the other hand, the code OP stands for open-pollinated. Seeds collected from these plants come 'true' for that variety when planted again.

A symbol to look for is a circle with AAS and Winner in a red banner. These varieties were tested for performance across the United States. The winners have different desirable characteristics compared to other varieties within the same crop.

Two terms that describe the growth habit of tomatoes are "determinate" and "indeterminate". Determinate means the plant will reach a specific size and then stop growing. The tomatoes ripen at about the same time. These plants are suitable for smaller spaces. Indeterminate means the tomato plant continues to grow. Both growth types need staking or caging since it is best to keep the tomato fruit off the ground. However, the indeterminate type needs a bigger support system. The benefit is a continuous harvest until frost or disease kills the plant.

After deciding what you want to grow, look for the number of seeds per package. To avoid buying too much, make a quick sketch of your garden space. Plan how many rows of certain vegetables you want to grow. Then look at the required spacing between each vegetable plant. When planting seeds, the plants are thinned to a final spacing because not all of the seeds will germinate. If you have seeds leftover, share them with a friend or store them in a cool dry location or in the refrigerator in a jar.

For more information about understanding seed descriptions and codes, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tip:

Information about other disease-resistant varieties can be found at https://kentuckypestnews.wordpress.com/2020/01/07/ordering-seeds-for-vegetable-gardens-3/.

Upcoming Extension Event:

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“How to Create an Abundant Organic Vegetable Garden” presented by Michael Hicks is sponsored by Green River Area Extension Master Gardeners. The program is scheduled for Tuesday, February 7 at 6:00 p.m. at the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office.