

Plant Searching – Mail Order Company Recommendations

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As a “plant collector,” or at least “gardener who needs cool and rare plants,” I have always appreciated the nurseries and garden centers that carry unique plants. If you say you are a bigger fan than I of The Flower Factory, we might have a fight on our hands because they represent that type of on-site source Madisonians have benefited from for years as well as access to some companies such as Song Sparrow Perennial Farm.

However, we have been losing a number of these specialty sites over the last few years without much in the way of replacement. I have always mail-ordered plants but never more than since my move 5+ years ago from Wisconsin to Iowa. The availability of unique plants is greatly reduced here and now the bulk of my plant sources are mail order. So I have a fair amount of trial and error experience that I am willing to share.

Keep in mind, my article is based on my personal experiences and opinions from others in the horticultural field; others may have different results. Companies go out of business or get reorganized or sold and product availability and quality may change as a result. For instance, from 2001 to 2011, a mail-order company purchased a number of other mail order firms through whom we had all enjoyed great product and service for years – they were our “go-to’s.” When they were bought out each company retained their name, but since then, I have seen the quality of the product and service decline significantly and I no longer order from any of them. If you look at reviews (Dave’s Garden is an excellent review site) and Better Business Bureau complaints, you will see customer reviews of these companies have changed to mostly negative. Other companies that once had good reputations but high prices no longer have plant size or quality worth the inflated prices. Another previously great source for unique plants that I tried again after moving here now have abysmal product (example - daylilies in 2.5” pots); their customer service people didn’t even get how bad their plants were even after they saw photos I had taken. Another firm is variable: some products are fine, others too small and some are sealed in airtight plastic. I have never seen that done before and those plants came dried out.

Criteria that make me stop ordering from a company includes:

- Poor quality plant material
- Inaccurate information
- Claims that are not true
- Variable product quality
- Better size/quality/price elsewhere
- Not sizable for price
- Poor customer service
- Poor refund service

Also Note: Don’t mistake the big national branding firms for plant producers. I’m not going to write this with all of their register and trademark symbols, but they include names such as Proven Winners, Ball, Plant Select, Cultivaris, Southern Living, American Beauties, HGTV Home Plant Collection, and Bloomin’ Easy. These are not companies for purchasing from; they are brands. Many garden centers and companies will carry plants with these brands, but it can vary considerably as to what nurseries actually grew the product. Your individual garden center/nursery may have grown the plants from plugs, or the finished product could be coming from a wide variety of wholesalers from across the country. Gardeners tend to be more trusting of marketing claims and images but keep in mind that this industry is no different from any other. For instance, just because the name is Proven Winners, it does not guarantee that every plant sold had several years being trialed, much less trialed in your area.

If you are new to mail ordering, here are things to consider.

Mail ordering:

- Increases plant selection dramatically.
- Opens your selection tremendously to rare and hard-to-find.
- I find refunds are generally easier – but just like retail, you must follow through quickly. I take pictures and send with email. I have found most companies are excellent at giving credit/replacements. Know their policy!
- If on their newsletter list, you will be alerted to new product offerings, sales, etc. online. I allow newsletters because many will announce sales, special shipping reductions, additions to inventory, limited time offers, etc.
- Some have paper catalogs, some online only – often online has more offerings than you might see in a catalog. Online is often more inventory accurate.
- Make sure you select the correct ship dates. If you don't have a place to protect from frost, most will not be hardened. I usually choose mid-April because I have a plastic covered gazebo. The average gardener probably shouldn't have ship dates much before the second week in May if they don't have such facilities.
- Just as in everything, quality costs more (if it sounds too good to be true...).
- You will incur additional shipping and handling charges (I divide shipping cost into plant cost to compare with retail).
- You can't see the product in person. After all you aren't the one picking from what is available.
- For best availability, you need to watch for when the product first becomes available; just as in a nursery/garden center, product availability can change through the season.
- Sale prices exist but not as many as retailers might do. You might also have to get on their email list – many mail-order firms wait until later in the season to offer sales than do the garden centers.
- As in most on-line ordering, the shipping cost may not show up until you take your shopping cart all the way to payment. If you decide shipping adds prohibitive cost, empty your cart. Many companies see carts with product sitting in them – they may contact you to encourage you to complete the sale.
- Some send plants without pots; you might have to pot them if necessary to hold for more than a few days or plant immediately. How I handle mail order plants when they arrive: • Unpack immediately and water. I water even if they look moist.
- Photograph any plants that look less than pristine. I take photos of them along with the rest of the order. If you put the plant in the ground right away and then try to get credit if it fails, you are not likely to get results. But showing that a plant was questionable on arrival has always gotten me replacements. Photograph any damage to the box.
- Some of the plants will arrive large enough to hold as they are until they can go in the ground. Others will come too small to compete with existing perennials; I "up pot" and grow out more extensive roots. You will need a spot to "hold" plants if you do this.
- It seems there are as many methods of packing and packing material as there are nurseries. You are spending a significant amount of money on mail order plants, so excellent packing is a huge criteria for me.

My Recommendations by Category

Rare, Unusual, Hard-to-Find

- **Far Reaches Farm Washington** www.farreachesfarm.com no paper catalog
They are plant collectors, and their site is also a conservancy for rare plants. I discovered them when I was looking for the vining species of monkshood and found many other plants I did not know existed. A must for shade gardeners. A good selection of fern cultivars, hard to find in retail stores. Plants come well grown and well packed. Shipped potted; most can be held in their own pots for planting, occasionally there are ones small enough I up-pot and grow out longer.

- **Fraser's Thimble Farms** British Columbia www.thimblefarms.com no paper catalog
 One of the finest places to find large selections of ferns; I found this company when looking for more unusual selections. Not only did they have about the best fern selections but also many other woodland plants which I like to collect. You will find lots here that you don't know. There is a photo gallery. Huge Hellebore selection. They have conifers and Japanese maples; I have never purchased. Well-grown and well-packed. Sent without pots. They will take care of any of the necessary inspections and phytosanitary needs coming into the U.S. For some reason they did not ship in 2020; I hope that won't be true in 2021.
- **Broken Arrow Nursery** Connecticut www.brokenarrownursery.com no paper catalog
 This one is well-known amongst top-notch horticulturists. They have a retail store and not everything they sell is available online but still a large selection. I advise going into the "Available Online (mail order)" tab; it is hard to see the really cool stuff available at the nursery only! Some of the coolest cultivars of plants you will find; I usually feel I know most new plants as they come out, here I am continually surprised to find exciting new plants I didn't know existed. They sell trees and shrubs in sizes (3 gal) that I didn't realize would be cost effective to ship. Shipped potted. Some of the best quality and shipping I have seen. I constantly watch for when they open online ordering because they have such unique plants that they sell out of a lot of plants soon, especially with an on-site nursery.
- **Arrowhead Alpines** Michigan www.arrowheadalpines.com paper catalog and **Wrightman Alpines Nursery** New Brunswick, Canada wrightmanalpines.com paper catalog
 I do these two together because most gardeners will not be into alpine/rock garden plants, which is their specialty. However, Arrowhead Alpines also sells woodland plants with an option of bare root in bulk (24, 48, 96 bare root options), which is excellent for gardeners establishing woodland gardens. They have been claiming that they will eliminate any of their non-alpine product, but at this point in time the woodlands are still listed. The bare-root plants are excellent quality. Wrightman Alpines is specifically alpine and probably one of the best selections available. Alpine plants from both sources can be quite small. Alpines are already fairly "touchy," so holding these plants can be challenging and I have had losses before they have been planted. I have learned to hold the alpine orders until May so that I can plant immediately. Excellent shipping for both.
- **Plant Delights Nursery** North Carolina www.plantdelights.com paper catalog
 This was my original go-to for the rare and hard-to-find. The company is well-known among experienced gardeners, especially since Tony is on the speaker circuit. The plants can be some of the highest priced for mail-order and I have had some issues with plants coming very small in small pots or not grown out to fill a pot. I have up-potted more plants from this company than any other; the plants are too high priced to put right into the ground if they are in small pots. I have not ordered from them since I found Fraser's Thimble Farms, Broken Arrow Nursery and Far Reaches, but I am not saying don't order from them; he carries really cool plants. But now I look first to see if the other nurseries carry the same plant larger and cheaper. Excellent shipping.
- **Ensata Gardens** Michigan www.ensata.com no paper catalog
 Yes, irises. This company is listed not for the commonly known bearded iris. They specialize in Siberian and (the reason for this) *Iris pseudodata*. I adore and have tried the tender, moisture loving exotics like Japanese and Louisiana iris but they just aren't tough enough for our area (at least the average gardener). Pseudodata iris are a cross between Japanese iris and the super tough, robust *Iris pseudocorus* (yellow flag). They arrive bareroot in plastic bags; they aren't large clumps, so I generally transplant into gallon pots and grow out longer. They are worth it.
- **Garden Crossings** Michigan www.gardencrossings.com not sure about catalog, I don't get one These aren't rare or hard-to-find but you will find new cultivars for the year and plants are generally well grown. The selection is likely better than local retail, heavy on Proven Winners. Packed well. They do offer 3-gallon options for shrubs, with good selection over local sources. At \$38 plus shipping, they aren't cheap, although not necessarily expensive either compared to local, but late in the season, they often send an end-of-year sale announcement cutting the price significantly and making the available selection a good deal.

- **Bluestone Perennials** Ohio www.bluestoneperennials.com catalog
Much like Garden Crossings, fairly standard perennials that are mostly well grown, cheaper pricing for multiples of the same plant. Offer sales on selected plants throughout the season so it is worth being on their email list. Plants are grown in coco-fiber pots. Interestingly, that sustainable effort is thwarted by a plastic label wrap but it is at least some effort! I have found some variability in the quality of plants purchased after the spring season. Excellent shipping.
- **Brushwood Nursery** Georgia www.brushwoodnursery.com not sure about catalog, I don't get one
Specifically vines – hardy for us are clematis, lonicera (honeysuckle), and wisteria predominantly – I also buy non-hardy passiflora. The selection of clematis is huge. Even better is how well they are grown. Clematis can be tricky to establish – often the standard 4.5" pots don't have roots established well-enough. These vines are grown in gallon containers and not shipped until they have extensive roots. They are removed from the pot and shipped in plastic bags helping shipping weight. I do remove those bags and put the plants back in gallon pots on arrival for critical drainage. Excellent shipping and receptive about replacing plants that have issues in the first several weeks.
- **Bloomingfields Farm Connecticut** www.bloomingfieldsfarm.com online only Daylilies, you say! Once again, there are many, many sources for daylilies but not many for the late blooming varieties. Most people don't realize there are late season blooming daylilies flowering from late summer through fall, depending on cultivar. 'Autumn Minaret' is the most well-known, but the selection is much larger. These tend to be taller and great for back-of-the-border late-season bloom. No fancy website here, very basic and you download the order form, fill it out by hand and send a check. Owned by a couple in their 80's, so this nursery may not be around for years. Delightful people to work with.

Natives

- **Prairie Moon Nursery** Minnesota www.prairiemoon.com paper catalog
There are two reasons I order from this company. One is the availability of bare root native plants which ship cheaply and establish better than root-bound potted. They sell 38-cell plugs – a good size for home gardeners. Plugs are an economic way to purchase a larger number of plants and, with proper care, may establish better than potted. Unlike many companies selling entire flats of plugs, they also let you order an assortment in the same flat. They also offer seed and seed mixes. Their literature is also quite good. Excellent customer service, great quality and excellent shipping.
- **Prairie Nursery** Wisconsin www.prairienursery.com paper catalog
Neil Diboll is one of the country's best experts on Midwest native plants. You can get flats of plugs economically and the quality is excellent. He also has a wide variety of seed mixes for different cultural conditions – I'm not sure I have seen any other source that puts together plant recommendations for so many diverse conditions, including clay. Both catalog and website are rich in information and education.

Annuals

- **Select Seeds** Connecticut www.selectseeds.com paper catalog
Generally I wouldn't include annuals– they are generally common local and easy to grow from seed. Select Seeds is one of my go-to's for seeds, but they also carry a fairly large selection of annuals and tropicals in small pots. These include many of the exotic and unusual plants you see in public gardens but not in the local garden center. There are also organic options for seed and plants.
- **Brian's Botanicals** Kentucky www.briansbotanicals.net believe online only
Tropical plants grow so quickly I have no problem getting them mail order; in this case they are generally cheaper than garden centers. I found this company this year and discovered horticulturists across the country know Brian and laud his business. I will increase my order next year; the plants are some of the most sizable tropical plants I have gotten and he has the coolest new plants you will see in the botanic gardens. Excellent packaging, shipping and customer service.

Succulents

- **Leaf & Clay** California www.leafandclay.co I believe online only Succulents are everywhere now and you may not find a need to order, but if you do, there are a number of great sources. Leaf & Clay has a wonderful selection with excellent size for price. Sizes come as 2", 2.5", 4", 5" and 6". They come bareroot, no pots, and are wrapped well. They also offer different assortment packs and cuttings. You can purchase a heat pack for \$5 and ship in cooler temperatures. Free shipping over \$75, there is a first-time buyer discount and they offer special discounts through the year. I have used customer service twice and they are exceptional.
- **Mountain Crest Gardens** California www.mountaincrestgardens.com not sure about catalog, I don't get one Mountain Crest is highly regarded with exceptional reviews. They have a huge selection of hardy and non-hardy succulents. They have sampler sets, cuttings, bare root and potted. They also provide at a nominal fee a heat pack for cold weather shipping. They provide a lot of education on succulent care and project ideas as well as a photo gallery from customers. They also have a full line of accessories.

Bulbs

- **Odyssey Bulbs** Massachusetts www.odysseybulbs.com online only
I have branched away from many of the mainstream bulbs and now add more unique bulbs annually such as corydalis, erythronium, anemone, hepatica, etc. Do *Hepatica transsilvanica* and you will never look at spring blooming bulbs the same again! This source is for when you feel you are advanced enough to move up to more specialized bulbs. They aren't cheap so I add a few every year. One negative is that you order and pay in spring for fall delivery. But it is because they sell out quickly.
- **B&D Lilies** Washington www.bdlilies.com paper catalog
My primary source for orienpet, asiatic, oriental, trumpet and a number of species lilies. Size does matter with bulbs. The bulbs are HUGE and selection is excellent. Quantity discounts when ordering multiples of the same bulb. Excellent shipping and customer service. Occasional mail catalogs with sales.
- **The Lily Nook** Manitoba www.lilynook.mb.ca paper catalog
My source for species lilies and especially martagons. I can get one or two martagon cultivars each at other bulb companies, but The Lily Nook is the only source (outside of England) that has a large selection of them. Martagons are not cheap – add some every year – but the fact that they are in Canada usually helps cost when the conversion is to U.S. advantage. The Lily Nook martagon bulbs are generally the best sized of my sources which helps when they can cost \$25-35 EACH!
- **Old House Gardens** Michigan www.oldhousegardens.com paper catalog
The focus is on heirloom bulbs; I am fond of species tulips and some of the more unusual shapes and colors of heirlooms compared to today's standardized hybrid forms. Excellent customer service; if they can't supply something, they add some bulbs to the order in addition to credit.
- **Brent & Becky's Bulbs** Virginia www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com paper catalog
Most gardeners know them, and they have a great selection of the usual bulbs including some of their own introductions. I use them for some of the harder-to-find bulbs such as gloriosa lily (vining, not a lily) and a number of species bulbs. They also sell some perennials which I don't buy other than some tropicals – ones that might arrive small but grow quickly in season. Excellent customer service and support of public gardens.
- **Van Engelen** Connecticut www.vanengelen.com paper catalog
This catalog cover is probably familiar to many gardeners. No color images (go online for that) but excellent descriptions, this is the catalog for bulk ordering bulbs at reasonable prices. This company offers economical options for mass plantings with the ability to purchase in quantities such as 25, 50 and 100. I used to have a group of friends who would order together and divide up the packages because it was so economical. The only problem is, it is so easy and affordable to order small bulbs at 100 each that it makes for a lot of planting when they arrive! If you sign up for their newsletter, they offer a number of sales. **John Scheepers** is the more consumer-oriented part of the same company and they have a color catalog.