

### Weird Rules

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The “buy local” movement creates a lot of guilt among gardeners: They may want to support their local garden centers, but they also feel seduced by exotic varieties of fruits and vegetables appearing annually in mail order seed and nursery catalogs. Before customers know what they’ll find in your store, they’re placing orders to hedge against the traditional experience.

Traditional experience? How about the disappointment of finding only four types of seed potatoes at the local garden center? How about the frustration of finding flat after flat of Big Beef, Roma, Early Girl, Sun Gold, Brandywine, Cherokee Purple and Better Boy tomato seedlings? Or, what about the more limited selection of peppers: Cali Wonder, Jalapeño, Banana and Cayenne? Even seed racks offer the same limited selections year after year.

At least some savvy gardeners would pounce on purple or blue seed potatoes, Jonatta Banana or Black from Tula heirloom tomato seedlings and Chipotle or Chocolate Habañero pepper seedlings. Wouldn’t it be novel to be able to plant a hedge that alternates white bell and purple bell peppers? Sadly, if you want any but green and red peppers, most garden centers offer only “rainbow” seed packs. While it may not be practical to stock a large variety of weird seeds and seedlings, even a modest selection could boost sales of your entire stock.

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#### Sourcing

*If your garden center doesn’t grow its own seedlings, you may be at the whim of large nursery suppliers who simply don’t provide a diverse selection of unusual stock. Smaller, local growers might work with you to handle a select heirloom collection specifically for your store. Even if you can’t offer flats of heirloom seedlings, you might enlist a faithful customer to grow weird varieties you’ll feature at your autumn promotional event. Or, if you’re running an Heirloom Growers’ Club, perhaps its members will show off their “best-in-class” produce from the seeds they got through your store. At least ask members for photographs you can use in your promotional literature.*

#### Make “Weird” an Event



Customers who happen upon an unusual seed or seedling variety in your store might buy out of curiosity. But you’ll get far more benefit from stocking something weird if you make an event of it.

Minimally, plan next season’s weird selections now and start mentioning their availability during this season. Or, announce your plan to stock a limited number of weird seeds and seedlings, and encourage customers to register so they’ll receive notice when you make your selections. The number of registrants will help determine how many seeds and seedlings you’ll need to satisfy demand.

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*Explore seed catalogs and gardening blogs for regionally favored plant varieties. Neck Pumpkins are rare outside of central Pennsylvania and could draw a lot of attention in other markets. Neck pumpkins are similar to butternut squash: they resist SVB and they contain only a small seed cavity relative to the amount of flesh. Some weigh upwards of 20 pounds!*

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and growing in partial shade. One advantage of forming a club is that you can ask members to place orders in the fall so you don’t over stock or come up short.

Offer a few outrageous heirlooms each season to create some buzz (track down “Peter Peppers,” for example, if you don’t blush easily); one or two can be the highlight of a mailing, a brochure, a newspaper ad or an in-store display.

If you can manage it, grow some of next year’s heirlooms this year so customers can see what’s coming. Feature the harvest at an in-store event

in autumn and promote the event in local media and online. Don't just display your homegrown heirloom veggies; serve them as hors d'oeuvres. If you can't get a reporter to attend your event, write an article yourself and submit it to your local newspaper.

Release more than just one announcement about your weird seeds. In fact, consider creating a one-sentence tag line to include on every promotional piece you produce through the year. "Ask Sandra about weird seeds" will spark curiosity, particularly when it pops up repeatedly in newspapers, mailings, radio spots, brochures, business cards, catalogs, in-store displays, web pages and social media streams.

Don't forget those mail-order seed catalogs. They tend to go out in mid to late winter. Time your own mailing and other advertising to coincide, and make sure your customers know which weird seeds they can find in your store. **GP**

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*Daniel Gasteiger, author of "Yes, You Can!" and "Freeze and Dry It, Too" from Cool Springs Press, blogs about produce gardening at [www.smallkitchengarden.net](http://www.smallkitchengarden.net) and invites you to introduce yourself on Twitter where he goes by the name @cityslipper.*