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THE NURSERY AND SEED TRADE CATALOG COLLECTION
OF THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE*

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When the United States entered the war in 1941, abnormal conditions throughout the world had already blocked the flow of economic materials in world trade. Many familiar raw materials necessary to our normal standard of living were now unobtainable, and so were the unfamiliar raw materials needed for making war. Products previously of little importance suddenly became vital; yet these, as well as many in constant use, could no longer be had.

Substitutes had to be found among our own native products. Many of the plants from which critical fibers, oils, and drugs were derived could be grown in this country. Investigators at the experiment stations had shown that they could be produced here, but it was cheaper to import them. Growers were willing to try the new crops—the question was where to obtain stocks of the vital plants.

In addition, many domestic agricultural products had been diverted from their normal uses to serve wartime purposes. To replace these, and to maintain agricultural production with a reduced labor force, millions of people never before interested in gardening planned Victory gardens. Their problem was where to obtain seeds and plants. The answers to many such problems of both commercial growers and amateur gardeners were available in the collection of seed and nursery trade catalogs in the Library of the United States Department of Agriculture.

The collection is a center of information for research workers and plant buyers, both in this country and abroad. It is used by botanists interested in the history and distribution of plants, by statisticians interested in price trends, and by plant breeders and landscape architects. The earliest published account of a plant's origin, description, and introduction, the rise and fall of a plant's popularity, or the history of a nursery or seed house may be traced through successive catalogs. Nurserymen and seedsmen ask where they can obtain plant material needed for their stocks for sale, or inquire about catalogs of their own which are missing from their files.

In the catalogs themselves, detailed descriptions and histories have superseded the brief statements of the early issues. The catalogs of the 1860's show the beginnings of color printing, which may be followed through the years to the beautifully colored illustrations of flowers, fruits, and vegetables found in modern catalogs. Increasing attention is given to lists of plants for special places and conditions, to color schemes, tables of blooming and fruiting periods, and directions for planting, cultivating, and pruning.

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In the war years the greatest service of the catalog collection is in answering inquiries from buyers of economic plants. Seeds or plants thought to be adaptable to war use--such as hemp, guayule, and milkweed--are greatly in demand.

Drug plants are urgently needed for medicines; and the collectors' lists included in the collection of catalogs are often the only means--except for an occasional advertisement in an agricultural or horticultural journal--of locating these, many of which have been known only as weeds. Many forage and field plants, for example, peanuts and soybeans have also been the subjects of inquiries. Foreign catalogs hold the clue for those crops common in other countries but little known in the United States. Most numerous of all are the questions as to where to obtain vegetables and fruits, sent in by people who want to share in the program to increase the Nation's food supply and people who want to produce food to supplement rationed goods.

The collection of seed and nursery catalogs in the Library of the Department of Agriculture was begun about 40 years ago through the efforts of the Office of the Economic Botanist of the Department. William P. Rich, the Librarian of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, had a collection of several thousand old catalogs, covering for the most part the period from 1845 to 1890. There were many duplicates, and from these the senior author selected several hundred catalogs to form the basis of the Department collection.

He added many more as he was able to turn them up on his official visits to nurseries in many parts of the country. Although nurseries usually kept no more than a single set of their own catalogs, odd copies could be picked up here and there which dovetailed with the ones previously acquired and went far toward completing the whole. Rare catalogs which were valued by their owners could not be obtained in the original, but could often be photographed for the collection, and copies made for exchange. Second-hand stores in many cities were sometimes unexpectedly rich in old catalog material, and so were the lists published by dealers in second-hand books.

The most promising place to look for valuable catalogs was in the files and the attics of very old nursery companies. The nursery owned by William Prince and Son, of Flushing, Long Island, was probably the earliest established large commercial house of its kind in America. It was founded in 1730, and issued catalogs up to 1865, when the nursery was sold. When the senior author learned that some early material, including four broadsides containing lists of nursery stock, dated between 1771 and 1799, was stored in the attic of the old Prince home, he obtained permission to have these photographed for the collection and to have duplicate prints made for exchange with other collections.

One of the employees of William Prince in 1826 was Patrick Barry, who became one of the founders of Ellwanger and Barry of Rochester. When they were closing out their business, they gave the Department permission to select old catalogs from their attic, keeping only a single set for themselves. Thus a valuable addition was made of catalogs running back to 1857.

Exchanges of duplicates made with the Missouri Botanical Garden and with U. P. Hedrick, horticulturist at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, also enlarged the collection.

In 1919 the collection came under the joint administration of the Library and the Division of Fruit and Vegetable Crops and Diseases of the Bureau of Plant Industry, Soils, and Agricultural Engineering. Gaps in the collection were filled in as far as possible, both by purchase and request. Nursery and seed firms cooperated by sending missing copies needed to complete the sets of their publications on file here.

Some of the rare old catalogs in the collection were purchased--for example, the collection bought from the estate of William Prince and Son, covering the

years 1818 to 1860. It included a number of letters, journals, and other papers, and in these the history of the firm and the range of its contacts may be traced even more fully than in the catalogs themselves. For example, some of the plants introduced by William Prince were brought back for him by sea captains from distant countries where their ships had stopped. The purchases included some catalogs of auction sales from the 1830's and 1840's, among which was C. J. Wolbert's Philadelphia Catalogue of Camellias, Rhododendrons, Cactus and Other ... Greenhouse Plants Just Arrived per Louis Philippe at New York... to be Sold at Auction on Wednesday, the 15th of April, 1840.

The growing recognition of the Library collection as a center of plant information is shown by the number of valuable gift collections which began to come in. Among these was that of C. R. Orcutt of La Jolla, Calif., a botanical explorer and collector, the founder of the Orcutt Seed and Plant Company of San Diego. Other gifts included the large collection of the Division of Plant Exploration and Introduction; the collection of domestic and foreign catalogs and orchid lists, acquired largely through the efforts of David Lumsden, which was turned over 2 years ago by the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine; the collection of Edward J. Wickson, sent in 1926 by the University of California; and the collection of catalogs listing cacti, made by Joseph W. Rose, sent to the Department in 1930. The Library of the Brooklyn Botanical Garden recently contributed more than 200 items--copies of issues lacking in the files here and publications of several firms not previously represented in this collection.

A list of duplicates was compiled and sent to a number of libraries with the request that they choose material lacking in their own files, and in this way the duplicates were divided among a number of Eastern and Middle Western horticultural libraries. Large numbers of the older catalogs were sent to the horticultural departments of Cornell University and the New York Agricultural Experiment Station at Geneva. Many of the foreign duplicates went to the Massachusetts Horticultural Society Library.

The earliest list in the collection is a foreign one, a photoprint reproduction of a list of seeds and plants issued in 1769 by Vilmorin-Andrieux, of Paris. The collection has catalogs from this firm covering the period from 1878 to 1940. The earliest foreign catalog is an English one, Robert Furber's Catalog of Curious Trees and Plants, 22 pages. It was issued without a date, bound with Philip Miller's Gardener's and Florist's Dictionary, edition of 1724.

The earliest German catalogs in the collection are two lists published in 1854 by Friedrich Pabst of Ilversgehofen, near Erfurt. These are bound with the Department Library copy of E. Regel's Gartenflora, volume 3. Erfurt was the center of an extensive business as early as 1668. Catalogs of Erfurt firms in the Library include the 1865 catalog of Haage and Schmidt, whose predecessors had been in business since 1730; and catalogs of F. C. Heinemann from 1862 to 1938.

The oldest American catalog in the collection is a photoprint copy of a list issued by the William Prince nursery, dated 1771. Other eighteenth-century catalogs of which there are photoprint copies are those issued by William Prince, dated 1790, 1793, and 1799; John Bartram & Company, 1790; and Minton Collins, Richmond, Virginia, 1793. Photoprint copies of the catalog of Daniel Smith and Company, Burlington, N. J., 1806, and of another of later date, are also in the collection.

The earliest printed American catalogs in the collection are those issued by Bernard M'Mahon of Philadelphia, published in 1804; Steadman & Floy, 1806; and John Bartram & Son, 1807. Among the old catalogs acquired in the early days of the collection is that of William Booth: Catalog of Kitchen Garden Seeds and Plants, 26 pages, dated 1810 at Baltimore. A Catalog of Peach Trees, one page,

issued by Mahlon Moon of near Attleboro, Bucks County, Pa., is dated 1845. This firm was founded by James Moon in 1767, and the last catalog, an undated one, was received in 1935.

The first catalog from the Grant Thorburn firm of New York City is dated 1821, although the business was established in 1805. Grant Thorburn died in 1863, and the firm name, continued by F. W. Bruggerhoff issued catalogs until about 1930. This name has probably continued in business longer than any other in this country. Peter Henderson, of New York City, who was employed by this firm, established his business in 1865, and it still continues.

The growth of the collection since 1919 has been steady. By the end of 1920 the catalogs numbered 16,344 American and 3,185 foreign lists, a total of 19,529. At the end of the 6-year period following, it numbered approximately 34,000 lists and occupied about 430 feet of shelving. Since December 31, 1926, it has more than doubled, so that it now includes more than 70,000 items. Most of the catalogs come from Belgium, the British Isles, France, Germany, Holland, and the United States, though there are many from other European countries and from Africa, Asia, Australia, and South America.

Requests come in from Government agencies, experiment stations, nurseries and seed houses, horticultural organizations, commercial organizations, libraries, schools and colleges, newspaper information services, and the general public. Inquirers want to know the names and addresses of nurserymen and seedsmen in certain places or handling certain plants; and where they can obtain seeds, roots, and plants of ornamentals, vegetables, fruits, and field crops. Compilers of check lists of specific plants use the collection as a whole.

Data contained in the catalogs are made available to the user by means of card indexes by scientific name and common name and a card index of the fruit varieties listed in catalogs received from firms in the United States and Canada.

At the present time many firms are unable, on account of the curtailment of communication with occupied countries, to send their publications with the promptness and regularity of pre-war years. These will again participate after the war. The collection owes its existence and its usefulness to the 2,000 nurserymen and seedsmen who cooperate year by year by sending their publications to the Department of Agriculture Library.

