

'Amazon.com' For Vegetables Helps Gardeners Pick & Choose Their Varieties

By Craig Cramer

Julie McQuain is passionate about vegetables. Each season she grows nearly 100 varieties in her garden in upstate New York's Catskill Mountains. In the dozen years she has gardened there, she has discovered which vegetables perform best with her shallow soils and short summers.

"It's a double challenge to find varieties that taste great and will grow under our less-than-perfect conditions," she says.

Now, thanks to a program in the Department of Horticulture at Cornell University, McQuain has a new tool to help her find varieties that will both please the palate and fill the pantry. McQuain is one of more than 800 gardeners contributing to the Vegetable Varieties for Gardeners Web site <http://vegvariety.cce.cornell.edu>, profiling more than 4,100 varieties. Gardeners who visit the site can rate and review their favorites, as well as pan those that aren't worth the garden space.

"The Web site is like an Amazon.com for vegetable varieties, only we don't sell the seeds," says Lori Bushway, a senior extension associate in the Department of Horticulture. "Just as avid readers visit Amazon to see what books are available and what other readers recommend, vegetable enthusiasts can visit our site to learn what varieties are available and what their fellow gardeners think of them."

For example, the burgeoning variety database details more than 560 different tomatoes. Site visitors can trim the list to just view such specific types of tomatoes as paste, cherry or heirlooms. They can also sort lists of varieties by how quickly they ripen, or how other gardeners rate taste, yield and how easy they are to grow. Gardeners can also filter their results to view only ratings by gardeners in their state or with similar growing seasons and find links to companies that sell the seeds.

"I joined the effort because I wanted to connect with a larger community of gardeners," says McQuain. "I've learned a lot I want to share, and I'm anxious to learn more from other gardeners' experiences."

That's exactly the kind of spirit of sharing Bushway wants to foster. "We want gardeners to know that their experiences are valuable, and that they can make a difference by contributing what they know through our Web sites," she says.

Like scientists, most gardeners are keen observers, and many record what they see in garden diaries.

"There are 7 million gardeners just in New York. If we can find new ways to tap into that information, it can be a win-win situation for both gardeners and researchers," Bushway adds. Varieties that have been overlooked may rise to the top in gardeners' ratings, or gardeners may discover varieties that are particularly disease- or pest-resistant under their particular conditions, she points out.

Meantime, McQuain is happy to have a forum to let others know that Alma is a great paprika pepper for cool-season gardeners.

"If I'd had something like this when I first started, it would have saved a lot of trial and error," she adds.