

“IF WINTER COMES CAN SPRING BE FAR BEHIND?”

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywitz

It was as common over two hundred years ago as it is today. Winter weary people have always looked for the signs of renewal, hope and better days that the spring season brings. One of the ways that helps us to keep faith that the winter winds and snow will eventually disappear into the sunshine and warmth of a new season is pursuing the seed catalogues that start arriving in February each year.

There weren't as many sources available years ago, nor were these sources so easily accessed as they are now. One of the ways in which available items were brought to the attention of local citizens was achieved through advertising in the local MERCURY, alerting readers of garden supplies that would be available for their spring needs.

There were several places where a member of the community in the 1800s could purchase their seeds and plants as most of the local stores and mills carried them. Gardening, at that time, was a necessity to provide for families and livestock. It was also a matter of pride to have the best-looking flowers, vegetables and field crops in the neighborhood.

For your planning pleasure in those years, a variety of seeds were offered throughout the season as well as those who advertised their early stock: 1889-Fresh garden and flower seeds at Westfalls.

1889 - Anyone buying \$1 worth of garden seeds of Seaton can select 25 cents worth of plants from his greenhouse, free. All his seeds are guaranteed just as represented. The greenhouse is open to everybody all the while. Catalogs are free.

1891 - Central Grocery has selected these with great care and includes all the best varieties of early peas and corn, choice flower seeds and everything the best to be found in the market. Opposite the Spring House.

1892: Seaton's Greenhouse for all your garden and flower seeds.

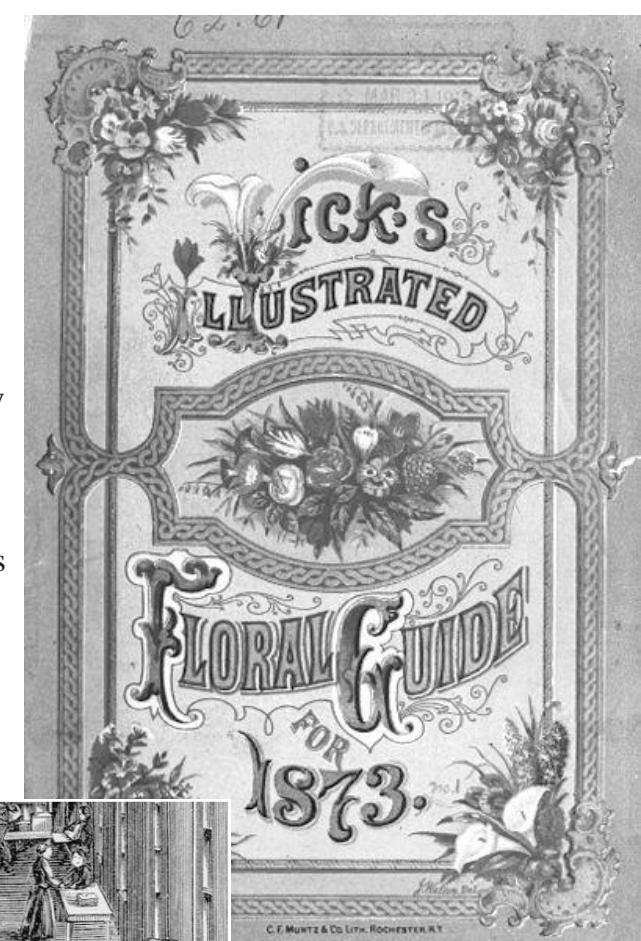
1923: Buy garden seeds in bulk at Black's Drug Store.

If you couldn't fulfill your needs with what could be found locally, you could refer to the ads supplied by Vick's Floral Guide and Illustrated Catalogue. In 1896, one of his ads ran in the February 13th MERCURY issue, and read as follows: "A gentleman was greatly surprised and pleased the other day at the reply a lady gave to the question: 'Do you plant Vick's Seeds?' Her answer was 'I always plant Vick's seeds in the front yard, but we get cheap seeds in the back yard which I know is a mistake.' It pays to plant good seeds and we advise our friends who are thinking of doing anything in this line to send 10 cents for Vic's Floral Guide for 1896. This amount may be deducted from the first order."

In 1897, the February ad read: "For nearly half a century the catalogue of Flowers and Vegetable Seeds, Plants, Bulbs, Roses, Grains and Potatoes has come as regularly as springtime. Here it is again, to remind us it's time to think about our gardens. This issue contains a half dozen full pages with half-tone illustrations. It seems full of the necessary information for either amateur or professional. Send 15 cents to James Vick's Sons for a packet of either Vick's branching Aster, New Japan Morning Glory or extra choice Pansy and a copy of our floral guide. If you state where you saw this notice, you will receive a package of flower seeds free."

The ad for 1898 read: "The annual catalogue sent out by the old reliable seed establishment of James Vick's Sons, comes to hand in a dainty and tasty cover of blue, pink, yellow and orange. The Golden Lily, the Pink Daybreak Aster, a brace of blue birds and the artistic lettering in black, blue, green, crimson and gold, all in harmonious combination make a cover of exquisite design and appearance. Many of the illustrations are fine half-tones. Four handsome colored sights of begonias, dahlias, nasturtiums and sweet peas add to the attractions. The list of seeds and plants covers a large and varied assortment, including nearly everything that can be desired for the garden, the lawn, the greenhouse. Valuable new varieties are offered as well as the thoroughly tried and proved

standard sorts. Vick's novelties are noted for their uniform excellence. In vegetables, the Gradus pea and the Jones Wax Bean are essential. Potato growers are offered the 'White Beauty' as a new variety with model qualities, combining size, high quality and great productiveness. But it is impossible here to note the many valuable offerings of this firm in fruits, flowers and vegetables. If you are



not a customer of this firm, send for this catalogue. It is free to all applicants. Address Vick's Sons, Rochester, N.Y."

James Vick (1818-1882) was born in Portsmouth, England, coming to New York City in 1833 where he learned the printer's trade, setting type for various publications including the Knickerbocker Magazine. The family moved to Rochester, New York in 1837 where James continued as a printer in local newspaper offices.

He developed an interest in horticulture that led to his becoming the writer and editor (eventually owner and publisher) of the Genesee Farmer. In 1854, he took over publication of the Horticulturist. This publication was devoted to horticulture, floriculture, landscape gardening and rural architecture. By the mid-1850s he sold his publication and focused his energy on starting his own seed business. Vick's Seeds, established in 1860, sent seeds to customers through mail-order. In 1862, the company employed one hundred-fifty people and produced its first catalogue, combining Vick's talents as a printer, writer, publisher and gardener.

This was the first catalogue to use color illustrations, making it quickly the most popular. He also entertained his readers with advice and anecdotes on every aspect of gardening. He enticed readers with tantalizing descriptions, wanting to create a taste for the beauty in gardening and a true love of flowers among the people. His catalogues included gardening advice, a forum for complaints, letters that he had received and a special section for children.

In 1866, he established his seed store on East Avenue, New York City, and the site eventually became one of the best known seed-display gardens in the country where over seventy-five acres of seed gardens were scattered about the city. Vick started the publication of 'Vick's Illustrated Monthly' which was devoted to floriculture and landscape gardening and was sold by subscription.

James Vick was probably the most successful horticultural seedsman, writer and merchandiser of his day. Vick died of pneumonia at the age of 63 in 1882. His business was carried on by his sons into the 20th century, the company then being sold to Burpee Seed, a company that still provides gardeners of today with their usual needs, heritage seeds, and new varieties to try.

As you look out at the snow, don't forget that it's time to plan your most beautiful and bountiful garden yet, turning wishful thinking into reality as winter turns into spring.