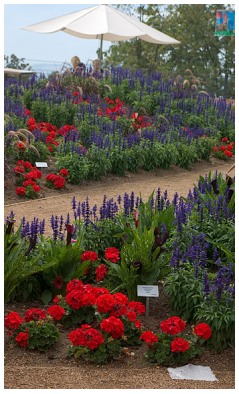

So it's winter: cold, dreary, days tamped between dim mornings and early dark.

The only bright and blooming items in your life are, YES! Seed catalogs! Lots and lots of seed catalogs, and if those photos aren't enough, more photos are featured online! What a treat!

Not only is now a good time to order, before companies are backlogged with requests, but doing so lets you dream of spring and summer, flowers and fresh vegetables, sunshine and the scent of fresh-cut grass.

And, for me, spring holds two highlights: picking the first full crop of asparagus from the 80-plant bed I've established mostly from home-grown plants; and starting seeds and plants for Chan's Plant Sale, my springtime tradition going on three decades in Rising Sun.

Imagining my customers' delight with some of the perennial varieties I've picked for this year just makes it better.

How could I resist a gaillardia that blooms the first year with an overabundance of maroon and yellow daisy-like flowers and a compact habit? I love gaillardias anyway because they bloom right through drought and past the early fall frosts. This one's called Arizona Sun, should you

want to try seeds yourself rather than hit my plant sale the three days before Mother's Day in May.

But I think the longest-lived perennials have to be the purple coneflowers and black-eyed Susans. Both are native wildflowers, are beautiful grown together, and provide seeds in the fall for finches and other birds. I love these two for cutting, too, as I do salvia, another long-lived perennial, flowering all summer with blue (or red) spikes that hummingbirds and butterflies love.

This year I'll try some shade perennials from seed, too, a blue-flowering sweet woodruff and mixed color astilbe. I've had white-flowering sweet woodruff for years; it makes a lovely low ground cover for shade alongside the heart-shaped epimedium leaves. I'm hoping the blue will spread out in a similar fashion in my wildflower garden.

Then there are the annuals I can't resist: castor beans, gourds including luffas (grow your own sponges,) moonflower – just like evening primroses, this one will open before your eyes, plus it smells good – scarlet runner, mina lobata and hyacinth bean vines, cleome and moss rose, and the tall amaranth that volunteers every year. (You can cook its leaves like spinach and eat its seeds.)

Most of these I grow for myself, but I usually have a few extras for sale, though last year the bean vines were thoroughly tangled! Fortunately, someone bought the whole slew, so I didn't have to untangle them.

The non-hardy perennials sometimes are a nuisance, because they have to come inside for the winter, but the lemon verbena, lemon eucalyptus, geraniums and fancy-leaved begonias are worth it. I'll be starting both verbena and two kinds of eucalyptus this year, lemon and the silver dollar variety, which looks neat amidst flowers.

My favorite plants in many ways, though, are the herbs. Transplanting lavender, rosemary and thyme is a delight because they smell so good, as do the lemon thyme and oregano I grow from cuttings. Then there's sweet marjoram, an annual, great in all kinds of dishes.

But this year I'm starting a few oddities as well, motherwort, thought to benefit the heart, and fenugreek, supposed to be helpful to diabetics, both perennials, and toothache plant. An annual, it truly does numb the mouth (I've grown it before) but also is used as an antibiotic and has the oddest flowers, sort of like elongated yellow buttons with red centers.

Beyond all the fun seeds, of course, are the vegetables for the garden we tend each summer – and, a little bit, in the winter, as I'm still harvesting brussels sprouts and leeks, and the spouse is tending tomatoes in the homemade tomato hothouse.

With tomato and pepper seeds sprouting in the cooler made into a warmer with jugs of hot water, we seem to be starting on the 2012 garden before wrapping up the one from 2011. Guess you could say some folks just won't quit playing in the dirt!