

Beware the Slick and Colorful Advertisements!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I had a phone call from a local resident this week asking about a particular plant, in this case grass seed. The first thing I asked the individual was whether they had seen an advertisement in the Sunday edition of a newspaper. The response was yes, and that causes the warning flags to go up and the sirens to go off in my head!

Before I go any further let me just say that most of the companies that advertise like this are legitimate companies. If you order grass seed or plants from these companies, you will likely get what you ordered. But it may be overpriced or the size of the plants you get may very well not be what you are expecting. The bigger problem is that they hype from the advertisement raises your hopes way too high. Quite often it isn't what is said in the ads, but what isn't said that is the problem.

In this particular case, the grass seed being advertised sounded like the perfect thing. Deep green, rapid growth and very cold hardy. The ads often show lots of pretty slick photos of a very nice looking lawn. The ad never tells you what kind of grass seed this was, other than the name it was being sold under. I'm just really glad that the individual called me. In this case, the grass seed was actually a blend of annual ryegrass, perennial ryegrass, red fescue and bluegrass. Of those four types of grasses, the only one that MIGHT be acceptable for our area was the bluegrass if it was the right cultivar. There are many bluegrass cultivars that are not well suited for our area. This particular grass blend, will germinate quickly and be a very dark green color, as long as it is cool and wet. But give us a summer like 2012 again, and most of a lawn planted to this stuff would be dead. The varieties are very winter hardy, but they aren't very heat or drought hardy!

Another ad that I recently saw was for a flowering scented shade tree. It was touted to grow very quickly and made it sound like it would be a full size tree in one growing season. Two of these trees were only \$15, plus shipping and handling of course. As you read past the hype and got to the bottom line it was a paulownia, a tree native to China. It's a coarse tree, it's a messy tree and it can become a weed. It can grow fast, but the wood is somewhat brittle. Flower buds are easily killed by the kind of temperatures we've seen this winter so it often never flowers here. If you were to order these, you most often would receive a bare root tree a foot or two tall. It is not a tree that I would ever recommend being planted.

These advertisements are put together by people who are very skilled at selling. They know that in February and March, after a long snowy winter, anything that looks springy is going to grab your attention. Then you throw in some cleverly worded text that, while not an outright lie, may be distorting the truth or not telling the whole story. Just like that you're hooked and your picking up the phone to order!

The first step is to be cautious. The slicker it looks and the better it sounds, the more cautious you want to be. You are better off to drive to a nursery and buy something within 100 miles of home than you are to order something out of some distant state. I always like the 72 hour rule. Set the advertisement aside for 72 hours and then before you order, call me up and talk to me. More than likely I will advise you to throw the ad away and not buy it because the old phrase that "it sounds too good to be true", is usually pretty accurate!