

## Questions and Answers

### USDA Investigates Packages of Unsolicited Seeds

#### *Seeks Help from Citizens to Collect Unsolicited Seeds Package*

#### **Why is the USDA investigating packages of seeds?**

People across the country have received unsolicited packages of seeds. USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is working closely with the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP), other Federal agencies, and State departments of agriculture to investigate. Our main concern is the potential for these seeds to introduce damaging pests or diseases that could harm U.S. agriculture.

#### **What should I do if I've received a package of seeds?**

It is important that we collect and test as many seeds as possible to determine whether these packets present a threat to U.S. agriculture or the environment. Anyone who receives an unsolicited package of seeds should follow these steps:

- Save the seeds and the package they came in, including the mailing label.
- Do not open the seed packets.
- Do not plant any of the seed.
- If the packets are already open, place all materials (seeds and packaging) into a zip lock bag and seal it.
- Place everything (seeds and any packaging, including the mailing label) in a mailing envelope. Please include your name, address, and phone number so that a State or Federal agriculture official can contact you for additional information.
- Contact your [State plant regulatory official](#) or [APHIS State plant health director](#) for instructions or where to send the package, to arrange a no-contact pick up, or to determine a convenient drop-off location.

#### **Are the seeds a health risk?**

We are not aware of any human health risks at this time. In an abundance of caution, people should wear gloves and limit touching the material. People who believe they are experiencing a health issue as a result of touching these seeds should contact their medical provider.

#### **If I received a package of seeds, should I contact Amazon?**

APHIS is working closely with other federal authorities and online retailers. Consumers who received packages of unsolicited seeds may want to consider changing their password on the

vendor's website. Consumers may also want to contact the eCommerce company if they are concerned that their account was compromised in any way or to complain about the fraudulent use of their personal information.

### **Why is it important to collect and evaluate these seed packages?**

Seeds for planting pose a significant risk for U.S. agriculture and natural resources because they can carry seed born viruses or other diseases. Imported vegetable or agricultural seed must meet labeling and phytosanitary requirements and be inspected by APHIS and CBP at the port of entry. Some seeds, including citrus, corn, cotton, okra, tomato, and pepper seed, are restricted and may require an import permit, phytosanitary certificate, inspection at a USDA Plant Inspection Station, or testing to ensure any potential risks are mitigated. Certain seed species are considered so high risk that they are prohibited. For example, true botanical seed of potato is not enterable from any country except Canada, and certain areas of Chile and New Zealand.

### **Why would someone send unsolicited seed packages across the country?**

At this time, we don't have any evidence that this is anything other than an internet "brushing scam," where sellers send unsolicited items to unsuspecting consumers and then post false reviews to boost sales. Brushing scams involving seed packets in international mail shipments are not uncommon. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has intercepted similar seed shipments in recent years.

### **Is USDA working with other government agencies to investigate?**

USDA is working with a number of Federal and State agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. Postal Service, and State departments of agriculture.

### **What is the status of the investigation? Who is receiving these seeds that you are collecting?**

We are working to quickly collect and test as many seeds as possible to determine whether these packets present a threat to U.S. agriculture or the environment. As we collect the seed packages, we are routing them to APHIS botanists who are examining the seeds to determine their species. Depending on the species and the potential risk it poses to U.S. agriculture, APHIS may test the seeds for pathogens that can cause plant diseases. Based on our preliminary analysis of the seed samples we've already collected, the seed packets appear to be a mix of ornamental, fruit and vegetable, herb, and weed species.

### **Is there a connection to agro-terrorism?**

At this point, we have not identified any link to agro-terrorism. This is an evolving situation, and we are working closely with Federal authorities to ensure we are evaluating every possibility.

### **Is there any indication the seeds are genetically modified?**

We don't have an answer at this time. The seeds we have identified are not uniform or of any particular type. They include a mixture of ornamental, fruit and vegetable, herb, and weed seeds.

### **SCOPE OF THE SITUATION**

#### **How many States have received unsolicited seeds? How many packages of seeds have been received in the United States?**

We do not know the exact number of seed packages that have entered the country, but we can confirm that we have received reports from 22 states at this time.

#### **Is the United States the only country that received unsolicited seed packages?**

No, other countries, including Canada, Australia, and European Union member nations are also reporting that their citizens have received unsolicited seed packages.

#### **Who is sending these seed packages, and where do they originate?**

We have not identified the source of the seed packages, but they appear to be coming from China.

#### **Is there evidence of shipments from countries other than China?**

We have received reports of packages coming from other countries.

#### **How were the people selected to receive these seed packages?**

The recipients seem to be people who recently purchased something online.

### **WHAT I SHOULD DO**

#### **What responsibilities do recipients of unsolicited seeds have in terms of reporting or disposing of the seeds?**

It is important that we collect and test as many seeds as possible to determine whether these packets present a threat to U.S. agriculture or the environment. Anyone who receives an unsolicited package of seeds should follow these steps:

- Save the seeds and the package they came in, including the mailing label.
- Do not open the seed packets.

- Do not plant any of the seed.
- If the packets are already open, place all materials (seeds and packaging) into a zip lock bag and seal it.
- Place everything (seeds and any packaging, including the mailing label) in a mailing envelope. Please include your name, address, and phone number so that a State or Federal agriculture official can contact you for additional information.
- Contact your [State plant regulatory official](#) or [APHIS State plant health director](#) for instructions or where to send the package, to arrange a no-contact pick up, or to determine a convenient drop-off location.

**I received seeds and threw them away. Is there anything I should do?**

You do not need to do anything.

**Whom can I call or email if I have other questions about packages of seeds?**

People who have received a package and have additional questions can call their [State plant regulatory official](#), [APHIS State plant health director](#), or the APHIS Customer Call Center at 1-844-820-2234. This line is staffed Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. People who received a package can also email the APHIS Smuggling Interdiction and Trade Compliance unit at [SITC.Mail@usda.gov](mailto:SITC.Mail@usda.gov).

**Can I send these seeds through the mail to agricultural officials? What are the procedures?**

Yes, please put seeds and any original packaging, including the mailing label, in a sealable plastic bag and place it in a mailing envelope. Please include your name, address, and phone number so that a State or Federal agriculture official can contact you for additional information. Contact your [State plant regulatory official](#) or [APHIS State plant health director](#) for instructions or where to send the package, to arrange a no-contact pick up, or to determine a convenient drop-off location.

**If I can't send the seed package to agricultural officials right away, how should I store them in the meantime?**

Put seeds and any original packaging, including the mailing label, in a sealable plastic bag. When you are able, contact your [State plant regulatory official](#) or [APHIS State plant health director](#) for instructions or where to send the package, to arrange a no-contact pick up, or to determine a convenient drop-off location.

**Will I be reimbursed for expenses associated with mailing my seed package to agriculture officials?**

At this point, we have no way to reimburse for postage. If you cannot mail the seeds, call your [State plant regulatory official](#) or [APHIS State plant health director](#) to arrange a no-contact pick-up or to determine a convenient drop-off location.

### **How can I receive updated information about these packages of seeds?**

USDA will provide updates on its website and through its Stakeholder Registry. To subscribe, click [here](#) and select the Plant Health News and Information topic.

### **ABOUT THE PACKAGES**

#### **Are there any specific markings on the unsolicited seed packages I should look for? What precautions should I take if a package is delivered to me?**

The packages have been labeled as containing a wide variety of products, including beads and jewelry, and they often appear to be coming from China. It is important that we collect and test as many seeds as possible to determine whether these packets present a threat to U.S. agriculture or the environment. Anyone who receives an unsolicited package of seeds should follow these steps:

- Save the seeds and the package they came in, including the mailing label.
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- Contact your [State plant regulatory official](#) or [APHIS State plant health director](#) for instructions or where to send the package, to arrange a no-contact pick up, or to determine a convenient drop-off location.

#### **What should I do if I already planted the seeds?**

If you already planted the seeds:

- Remove the seeds or plants and at least 3 inches of the surrounding soil and place inside a plastic bag.
- Squeeze out the air and tightly seal the bag.
- Place the bag inside a second plastic bag, squeeze out the air and seal it tightly.
- Put the bag in the municipal trash. Do not compost it.

- If you planted the seeds in reusable pots or containers, wash the planting container with soap and water to remove any remaining dirt. It's important to wash the container over a sink or other container to catch the run-off. Put the run-off down the drain or flush down a toilet.
- Soak clean planting container in a 10 percent bleach and water solution for 30 minutes.

### **What is USDA doing to stop the unsolicited seeds being delivered?**

We are working closely with CBP to intercept illegally imported seed packages. We're also working with other Federal authorities, the U.S. Postal Service, express carriers, and online marketplaces to stop future deliveries.

### **What should U.S. consumers know about purchasing seeds or plants online?**

Online purchases of plants, seeds, and other plant products can be risky because these items can carry a range of invasive pests and diseases. These purchases can also be illegal without proper inspections and paperwork, such as permits or plant health certificates. Before buying seeds or plants online from international vendors, contact your local [State plant health director's office](#) to ask if the items you wish to order need to be inspected or meet other conditions to bring them into the United States legally and without pests.