

ON TEST

BETTER PLANTS BY POST

We reveal the best and worst mail-order plant suppliers



WHAT WE TESTED FOR

• EASE OF USING THE WEBSITE

To choose, buy and organise delivery and payment

• OVERALL CUSTOMER SERVICE

Overall communication, including dealing with queries and complaints

• PACKAGING

Plants are clearly and correctly labelled and suitably protected

• DELIVERY

Communication on despatch and delivery, updates on the order, time of delivery and substituted or missing items

• QUALITY AND VALUE FOR MONEY

Of the plants and bulbs that were delivered

• SATISFACTION

With the purchase and likelihood of recommending the supplier

Many gardeners choose to buy plants from mail-order catalogues or on line to take advantage of tempting special offers, or because it's an easier way to track down the particular plant variety that they want. But problems with packaging, delivery and poor plant quality can sometimes turn the buying experience into a bit of a nightmare.

When we first investigated this issue in summer 2012, more than a third (36%) of people told us that they had experienced problems with buying plants by post, prompting us to develop The Which? Gardening Best Practice Criteria, a 10-point plan for retailers to adopt to ensure a better experience for gardeners.

In 2014, we repeated our survey to find the plant suppliers that you most and least recommended, no matter what type of plants they sell. This year, we've gone one step further to find out who you think offers the best postal service for buying bulbs, climbers and roses, fruit and veg, and perennials. We'll be reporting on who supplies the best plug plants in March 2017.

WHAT WE DID

In August 2016, we contacted members of the Which? Connect online panel to ask them about their experiences of buying plants online or by mail order. The 2,038 members of the panel who responded had bought different types of plants from a range of suppliers in the past 12 months and were able to tell us how happy they were with up to three mail-order plant purchases each, giving us feedback on 3,643 plant-shopping experiences overall.

We asked members to rate several factors that contribute to a good postal-plants process. They also rated their satisfaction with the supplier for the type of plants that they bought and whether they would be likely to recommend this supplier to a friend who wanted to buy the same types of plants. We used these answers to create a customer score for each supplier. We had to receive a minimum of 30 responses per supplier for each type of plant to provide ratings and a customer score for it.

Bulbs

TOP-FIVE BULB SUPPLIERS



Crocus 79%

Although Crocus is not a specialist bulb supplier, 95% of people who had purchased bulbs from Crocus would recommend it to a friend, giving it the second highest level of recommendation of any company in our survey for its bulbs, just behind David Austin for its roses. The company gets good ratings for all aspects of its service and, overall, 83% of its customers would be happy to buy bulbs from Crocus again.

'Everything is securely packaged, arrives on time and is excellent quality'

Peter Nyssen 79%

Peter Nyssen has been selling bulbs for nearly 60 years and topped the table to be named a recommended supplier when we tested bulb suppliers in Sep 14. Two-thirds of its customers were very satisfied with their experience. Nine out of ten said that they would be happy to buy its bulbs again and the same number would recommend Peter Nyssen to a friend who wanted to buy bulbs.

'Good quality bulbs of the right varieties, delivered in good time - what more do you want?'

Bloms Bulbs 78%

The Blom family has specialised in selling bulbs since 1860 and boasts 65 gold medals from the Chelsea Flower Show for its tulip exhibits. Bloms' good customer score reflects the fact that 83% of its customers would recommend it to a friend, and 73% said they were very satisfied with their bulb-buying experience. Encouragingly, 90% of Bloms' customers would be happy to buy bulbs from it again.

'I've tried cheaper firms but come back to Bloms because of the service and quality of its products'

BULBS ARE THE SECOND MOST POPULAR type of plant to purchase by post after plug plants - 41% of the people we surveyed bought them this way. People are slightly less concerned with how well their bulbs are packaged than other types of plants, but more concerned that their bulbs are clearly labelled. Overall, people were satisfied with their bulb suppliers, as several receive good ratings for most aspects of their service. This means that we have no hesitation in recommending five mail-order bulb suppliers for you to choose from.

CONTINUED

RHS Plants 78%

RHS Plants receives a good overall customer score from Which? members who bought its bulbs. Not a single customer told us that they were dissatisfied with their experience of buying bulbs from RHS Plants. An admirable 89% would recommend the company to a friend who wanted to buy bulbs, and 84% would be happy to buy this type of plant from the company again.

'Researched the plants on the RHS.org.uk website and then bought them on the RHS Plants website. Easy peasy'

Suttons 72%

Suttons is best known for selling seeds, but our survey suggests that you won't go far wrong if you add a few bulbs to your order. A huge 94% of Suttons' bulb customers said that they were satisfied with the buying experience and 86% of them would be happy to buy their bulbs from Suttons again. A high level of customers would also recommend Suttons to a friend for buying bulbs.

'I have always been highly satisfied with every aspect in dealing with Suttons'

LOWEST-SCORING BULB SUPPLIERS

Van Meuwen 50%

Van Meuwen receives a very poor customer score from customers who have bought its mail-order bulbs and has the unhappy distinction of having the highest proportion of its customers who were very dissatisfied with their buying experience. Another factor that stands out in our survey is the 20% who rated the quality of their bulbs as poor or very poor.

'Bulbs didn't arrive as they were out of stock. It offered to send them well after the planting season was over'

Bakker 45%

Bakker receives a very poor customer score from the people who bought its bulbs and a higher-than-average 20% of customers said they wouldn't be happy to buy bulbs from Bakker again. It lags behind other bulb suppliers for delivery and ease of using the website. Some said they were put off Bakker by the number of offers and mailings they received afterwards.

'On occasions the items ordered weren't of the best quality, but were replaced quickly'

SPECIFICATION	WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE							CUSTOMER SCORE	
	Sample size	Value for money	customer service	Overall	Ease of using the website	Delivery	Packaging		Overall plant/bulb quality
Crocus	37	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	79%
Peter Nyssen	32	★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	79%
Bloms Bulbs	40	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	78%
RHS Plants	38	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	78%
Suttons	36	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	72%
Sarah Raven	80	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	67%
J Parker's	103	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	65%
Thompson & Morgan	162	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	57%
Van Meuwen	42	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	50%
Bakker	69	★★★	★★★	★★	★★	★★★	★★	★★	45%

USING THE TABLE Companies are ranked by customer score, based on a combination of survey respondents' overall satisfaction with the supplier and likelihood to recommend the company to a friend. The top-five bulb suppliers are highlighted in blue. Those with a very poor customer score are shown in grey. Star ratings indicate how satisfied customers are with aspects of the service. We require at least 30 responses to rate each aspect. n/a = not enough responses received.

ALTHOUGH ONLY 13% OF PEOPLE SURVEYED had bought a mail-order rose in the past 12 months and just 16% had bought a climber by post, our results strongly indicate who is making their customers happiest in this category. Which? members give a thumbs up to David Austin for its postal roses and Crocus for its climbers. Both companies achieved excellent customer scores and a very high proportion of customers who would buy from them again.



David Austin Roses 89%

Which? members are extremely satisfied with their experience of buying from this world-famous breeder of English roses, whose website makes it particularly easy to find the best rose for your space. A remarkable 96% of customers would recommend this supplier to a friend and the same proportion would buy their roses from David Austin again. Customer service, delivery, packaging and plant quality all receive top marks, while an impressive 42% of its customers rated the company as excellent value for money.

'Fantastic choice of roses and useful planting instructions, as well as very good customer service'

Crocus 88%

People who bought climbers from Crocus were nearly three times more interested in being able to specify a delivery slot than people who bought them from other companies. They were also some of the happiest customers in our survey. They were thrilled with the quality of their plants and how they were delivered. Unusually, every single person who bought a climber from Crocus rated the packaging of their plants positively and said that they were satisfied with their climber-buying experience. A massive 94% of customers would consider buying climbers from Crocus again.

'A wide selection, excellent-quality plants delivered quickly and exceptionally well packaged'

SPECIFICATION	WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE							CUSTOMER SCORE	
	Sample size	Value for money	customer service	Overall	Ease of using the website	Delivery	Packaging		Overall plant/bulb quality
David Austin Roses	52	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	89%
Crocus	40	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	88%
Thompson & Morgan	63	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	57%
J Parker's	37	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	56%

USING THE TABLE Refer to the bulbs table on p32.

YOUR RIGHTS

Just over half of the people in our survey who had experienced problems with their mail-order plants didn't complain. But under the Consumer Rights Act 2015, you have rights if plants do not match the description given by the seller or are not of 'satisfactory quality' (are damaged or dying).

The Act says that you're entitled to a refund as long as you notify the retailer of the problem within 30 days – so let them know as soon as the plants arrive. If you discover the issue after the first 30 days, you could instead ask for a replacement plant or some money back if the replacement isn't possible or couldn't be provided within a reasonable time.

Visit which.co.uk/consumer-rights/plants for more details.

Fruit and vegetables

THERE'S DEFINITE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT for mail-order retailers of fruit and vegetable plants. There are no good or poor suppliers in this category because no company is doing significantly better or worse on most of the factors that their customers rated, and none of the companies achieve a customer score of over 70%. The customer score combines how satisfied people were with their overall mail-order experience and whether they would recommend the company to a friend.

Thompson & Morgan stands out for having a higher-than-average number of people who were both dissatisfied with their fruit-buying experience and would not recommend the company to a friend, but a greater level of satisfaction from customers who bought vegetable and herb plants saves the company from a poor overall customer score.

As with other types of plants, there are five key areas where mail-order suppliers of fruit and veg need to get things right (see right).

KEY CONCERNS

The top-five concerns for people who buy plants by mail order are that:

- plants arrive healthy
- plants match their description on the website or in the catalogue
- plants are securely packaged
- plants are despatched at suitable times for planting
- plants are clearly labelled.



SPECIFICATION	WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE							CUSTOMER SCORE	
	Sample size	Value for money	customer service	Overall	Ease of using the website	Delivery	Packaging		Overall plant/bulb quality
Dobies of Devon	33	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	64%
Marshalls	59	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	63%
DT Brown	32	★★★	n/a	n/a	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	61%
Thompson & Morgan	91	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	58%
Suttons	48	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	55%

USING THE TABLE Refer to the bulbs table on p32.

-----Perennials-----

PERENNIALS HAD BEEN BOUGHT BY 39% OF THE PEOPLE WE SURVEYED, making them the third most popular type of plant to buy by post. Buyers of perennials particularly want plants that are clearly labelled when they're sent. Thompson & Morgan received the lion's share of Which? members' perennial plant custom, but our survey suggests that customers are more satisfied with and likely to recommend those perennial suppliers that receive better ratings for the delivery, packaging and quality of their plants.



Crocus 73%

Crocus was the second most popular company in our survey for Which? members to buy perennials from, and a good proportion of its customers were happy with many aspects of the service. Six in ten were very satisfied with their buying experience and eight in ten would buy perennials from Crocus again.

'Crocus gives good information on how to care for the plant. Delivery is fast, packaging is good and, most importantly, the plants arrive looking fresh and healthy'

RHS Plants 71%

RHS Plants receives a good customer score for selling perennial plants by post because 81% of its customers would buy from it again and 83% of them would recommend RHS Plants to a friend. The way that the plants are packaged gets a high level of approval with more people than average giving it an 'excellent' rating.

'Easy to order, lots of information about eventual plant size, where and when to plant, etc. Plants in excellent condition and well packaged'

PERENNIALS		WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE						
SPECIFICATION		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Crocus	74	***	****	****	****	****	****	73%
RHS Plants	47	***	****	****	****	****	****	71%
Sarah Raven	56	***	****	****	****	****	****	66%
Hayloft Plants	69	***	****	****	****	****	****	61%
VanMeuwen	54	***	****	****	****	****	****	58%
Thompson & Morgan 11	165	***	****	****	****	****	****	55%
J Parker's	48	***	****	****	****	****	****	53%

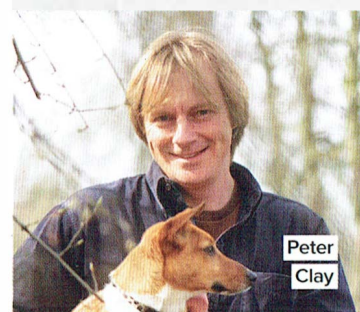
USING THE TABLE Refer to the bulbs table on p32.

WHAT IS CROCUS GETTING RIGHT?

Mail-order specialist Crocus supplies a huge range of plants by mail-order from its base in Windlesham, Surrey and prides itself on having supplied the plants for 23 Gold Medal-winning gardens at the RHS Chelsea flower show.

In our 2014 survey, Crocus was one of our recommended suppliers, receiving the fourth highest customer score. This year, after splitting our results by category of plant, Crocus is a highly-rated supplier for bulbs, climbers and roses, and perennials. Customers rate the packaging, delivery and quality of Crocus plants highly, and are happy with the customer-service aspects, including value for money and ease of using the website.

The co-founder of Crocus, Peter Clay, told us: 'We believe that choosing plants for the garden should be as easy and inspiring as choosing furnishings for your home. That's why we spend so much time understanding how people want to use our website, why choice is important. (3,000 plants versus 300 in a garden centre), why we now deliver when people are able to plant (next day/named-day service), how best to pack our plants so they arrive in perfect condition (award-winning packaging), and why our plants need to be better quality than they imagined.'



PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK WINWOOD; GAP PHOTOS; SHUTTERSTOCK