Questions for ECHO? Read This First!

Every Wednesday, six to eight ECHO staff meet to discuss the letters and e-mails we have received with requests for information or advice. "Technical Requests" is the term we use for the questions those of you in our "network" encounter as you work with small-scale farmers and urban gardeners. Responding to these requests is an important part of our ministry, and some of our staff spend a great deal of time researching answers. We thought it might be helpful and interesting for you if we shared the way we process technical requests.

Usually we get several dozen requests per week, about 60% of them arriving via e-mail. When first processed, a Technical Request Form, or TRF, is attached to the letter. The sender's name and address is written on the form. The TRF helps us in the process of answering questions, writing down seed orders, or listing publications that need to be gathered. It also helps us to keep track of your request as it passes through different people's hands.

After the TRF is attached, the request is sent to the technical staff. We read through each request, authorizing shipment of requested Technical Notes and seeds and making note of questions that we need to answer. To help us answer questions, we use our library of over 2500 books and numerous files and publications; we check the Internet; and we talk to people at ECHO or in our network who have experience and expertise in particular areas. Over the years, ECHO staff have written dozens of Technical Notes (TNs) on a variety of topics to help us answer frequently asked questions. We also have a bookstore with many useful titles that we sometimes recommend. [Note: All of our TNs and past issues of EDN are on our web site and can be accessed from there. They are also on the CD-Rom that we reviewed in the last issue of EDN. Our bookstore is on the web, too.]

For the past year and a half, ECHO interns have been included in the technical request answer process. Each month, one intern is assigned to help answer technical requests three mornings a week, with careful guidance by more senior staff. This enables the intern to learn about a variety of topics and makes more time available than we would otherwise have for searching through the library for information.

After answers have been written and proofread and the appropriate seeds or publications have been authorized, the technical staff send the TRF to the central office where volunteers gather the publications (Technical Notes, ECHO documents, books, etc.) that have been authorized. If seed needs to be gathered, an intern is assigned the task of going to ECHO's climate-controlled seedbank to collect the packets.

Plant information sheets are often included with seed orders. These sheets tell how to plant and cultivate the particular species. A harvest report is sent along with seed, to be filled out by the recipient after the harvest and returned to ECHO. This data is entered into a computer so that we can track how seeds that we send have performed around the world.

The next step is to calculate payment, if any. For people working in agricultural development, their first ten trial packets of seed are free (but only one free packet of any particular variety is sent for free, so ten different varieties of seed need to be selected). Once we have received a completed seed harvest report from a development worker, s/he may request up to ten more free trial packets of seed. The first $8.00 worth of ECHO TNs are also sent for free to those working in agricultural development. More seeds or publications can be purchased. We do not send books or seeds before payment has been received.

Finally a volunteer gathers the seeds, letters and publications and mails them to you. Then the TRF, which contains information about the request and the responses given, is coded into the computer. The next time you write, we can quickly bring up the history of our correspondence with you. The TRF and your original letter are stored in our files.

Usually numerous people handle a technical request before the process is completed. We can be most efficient with our time when different people are responsible for different parts of the process, and our many volunteers bless us greatly by handling some of these steps. However, having many people involved also means that not everyone who handles a request will recognize your name, even if you are a part of our network. Please do not be offended if you are not recognized; your requests are important to us.

A typical technical request takes at least a week to go through the whole process described above. If you have a time-sensitive order, please let us know several weeks in advance!

Lately, more and more of the technical requests are coming over e-mail. Often people do not list their full name and address, and we might not even know what country they are in! Also people in distant parts of the world learn about us from the web and ask questions even though they are not part of our network. For example, a question about raising rabbits by John Doe might be from a high school student in Argentina. We ask that people who write to us over e-mail include their name, postal address, e-mail address and the organization with which they are working. If you are a member of our network, please identify yourself as such. This will keep the request process from slowing down and will help us be the best stewards possible of the resources we have been given. If your information is not complete, your request will be returned to you and you will need to submit it again with the required information. Please also tell us to what your request relates, so that we have as much information to work with as possible. Information about the climate where you work is helpful, too. A good way to give us insight into the climate is to tell us the four most commonly grown crops in your area, as well as what time of year they are grown.

http://edn.link/3w9mc4