



Coleus: The “Idiot-Proof” Plant

This annual is easy to grow, has great shelf life and display quality at retail, and is available in enough colors and varieties to suit any home landscape

By Rick Schoellhorn

Everybody seems to have a group of plants that they really enjoy growing, and coleus has always been my favorite. OK, OK. Plecranthus are the true love of my life, but coleus run a very close second! They are easy-to-grow, have a great retail shelf life and practically turn any mixed container into a work of art. Coleus is about as close to idiot-proof as an annual plant can get, and likely that is why I like them.



Which coleus for which use?

Landscape cultivars	Description	Vigor	Full Sun?
'ColorBlaze Lifeline'	Chartreuse to yellow	Medium	Yes
'Pineapple'	Chartreuse with purple edge	High	Yes
'Gay's Delight'	Chartreuse to yellow with purple veins	High	Yes
'Black Prince'	Black w/green edge	High	Yes
'ColorBlaze Darkstar'	Black, matte	Medium	Yes
'ColorBlaze Dipt in Wine'	Burgundy w/ yellow green highlights, lg leaf	High	Yes
'Alabama Sunrise'	Burgundy w/ yellow green highlights	Medium	Yes
'Red Ruffles'	Pink red with green veins	Medium	Part sun is best
'ColorBlaze Kingswood Torch'	Pink red with green edges,	Medium	Yes
'Henna'	Red tones and frilled yellow edges	High	Yes
'Big Red Judy'	Red tones, large leaves, vigorous	High	Yes
'Redhead'	Red tones, medium lvs	High	Yes
'Filly Milly'	Deep red tones, vigorous	High	Yes
'Freckles'	Orange green, marbled	Medium	Yes
'Rustic Orange'	Orange w/green edge	Medium	Yes
'Gage's Shadow'	Dark green, with purple black tips	High	Yes
'Lancelot Mocha Velvet'	Chocolate brown, lance leaf	High	Yes
Hanging Basket types			
'Swinging Linda'	Deep burgundy with pink edge	Medium	Part sun is best
'Red Queen'	Deep burgundy	High	Yes
Drop series	Red, pink, green	Medium	Yes
Lava Series	Red, pink, green	Lower	Yes
Geek Factor (great for close up)			
'ColorBlaze Sedona'	Rust with rosy purple highlights	Medium	Yes
'Fishnet Stockings'	Green with black veins	High	Part sun is best
'ColorBlaze Royal Glissade'	Burgundy overlay on pink and green	Medium	Yes
'Lemon Twist'	Frilled yellow green leaves, red edges	Medium	Part sun is best
'Limon Blush'	Pinkish, flesh tones unique leaf	Medium	Yes
'Nuclear Fusion'	Small thin strip leaves red, yellow green	Lower	Part sun is best
'ColorBlaze Alligator Tears'	Clear white and green, compact plant	Lower	Part sun is best
'Snazzy'	Ragged strip leaf marbled green/yellow	Lower	Part sun is best
'Swallowtail'	Feather like green leaves w/yellow edges	High	Yes
'Fright Night'	Irreg. ragged strip leaf red, green, and black	Lower	Yes
Kong Series	Green edges, red, burgundy, huge leaves	Medium	Part sun is best
'Pink Chaos'	Electric pink, small lance leaf, green edge	Lower	Part sun is best

A Short History

This group of plants comes from tropical Africa and Southern Asia. This is why they do not like to be chilled in cold weather conditions. They have long been regarded as quasi-medicinal herbs as are most of the plants from the mint family (Lamiaceae). Since almost all the mint family have a really high essential oil content it makes them all fit into some sort of medicinal use category (either therapeutic or recreational). So if you *have* to know, coleus is used as a slight soporific tea or, like chamomile, a way to aid in sleeping. Coleus has been following humans via their gardens for over 800 years and there has been a lot of selection and adaptation in that time. Recently, plant taxonomists changed the scientific name from *Coleus blumei* to *Solenostemon scutellarioides*, but the common name coleus remains.

Varieties

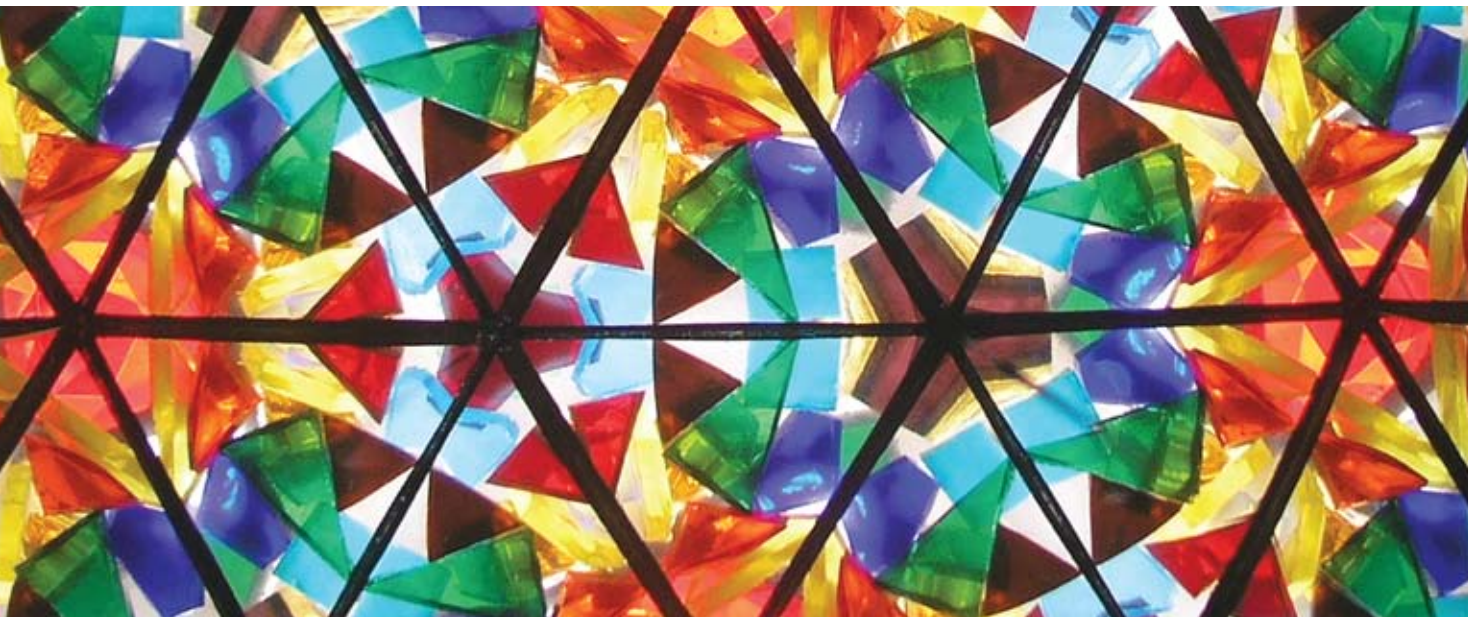
There are more than 2,000 different cultivars of coleus floating around out there, and it can be pretty confusing trying to figure out which ones you want



to have at retail. Fashion in colors and types seem to go back and forth between bright clear-toned colors and a huge variety of odd mixtures in color. In general, right now, we seem to be in a trend of high impact

colors. Coleus has become a plant used heavily in landscapes for the color impact. Main colors for high landscape impact are chartreuse-green, burgundy-red and orange predominantly. Collectors and

small-space gardeners tend to like the more artistic mottled tones or colored veins in the leaves as they are better for close-up viewing. So give this a thought when selecting for your clientele.



Kaleidoscope of Color



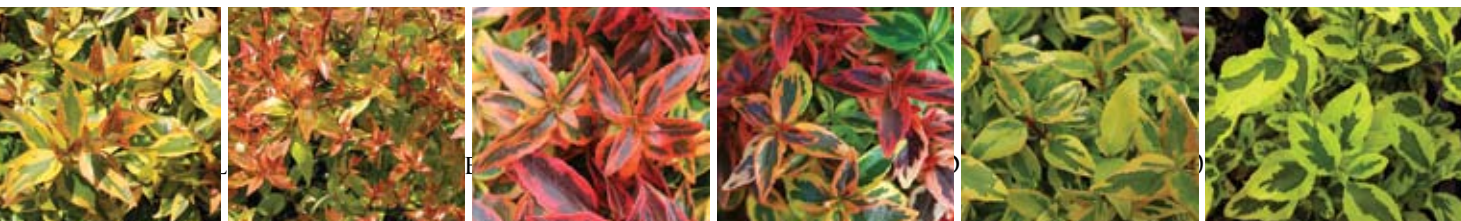
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Tips for Retail Success With Coleus

Light. Most coleus prefer partial sun, but with water many are full sun tolerant, some older cultivars will scorch in high outdoor light levels. At retail, position coleus in partial sun — the color brightens displays and highlights the flowering plants around them creating add-on sales.

Temperature. 55° F night and 65-75° F day is ideal. It is extremely important to AVOID CHILL. Coleus are tropical; they need warmth to continue to grow vigorously. A single night at 40° F can stunt your plants, so make sure they have some protection until night temperatures warm in spring. Signs of chill damage include wilting and lower leaf drop.

Watering. The best rule of thumb is always keeping this plant lightly moist. They can tolerate a light wilt, but dry them out too much and the lower leaves come off. Once the plants become hardened by stressed leaves begin to reduce in size and it is best to just get new stock.

Seed Versus Vegetative

While most folks likely aren't aware of it, there are some pretty profound differences between coleus from seed and coleus from vegetative breeding, but it definitely plays into the success your customers have with the plants they buy. Seed-produced coleus are what the industry used to grow almost exclusively as they were less expensive and easy to produce. However, they also have a tendency to flower early, set seed, and then begin losing leaves and deteriorating. Hence the old gardener's rule, you should always pinch the flowers off your coleus. Seed coleus is also less tolerant of low water and landscape stress, making them a bit less desirable for the average consumer. In the last 10 years, there has been a lot of growth in vegetative coleus — which flower much later in the season or not at all. In this case, their performance for consumers is much better and they require almost no maintenance. These plants are also more tolerant of high light and landscape conditions as well as



BEST REFERENCES

There are some good resources available on coleus available to help you learn more about this versatile plant.

Best Website: Coleus Finder, www.coleusfinder.org

Best Book: *Coleus: Rainbow Foliage for Containers and Gardens* by Ray Rogers



www.ceramousa.com
800-325-8303

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more vigorous in containers for the consumer. It might be worth asking your supplier which are seed versus vegetative in their offerings and doing a bit of testing on your own.

There is a lot of wonderful breeding going on out there with an emphasis on late flowering, strong coloration and the search for the sun tolerant elusive purple leaf. New releases emerge every year, so the list of cultivars is always changing. My advice is to find a good quality supplier and pick the main colors that would be attractive to your clientele and would make for colorful displays.

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