

Coleus Finds its Place in the Sun



Photo to be credited to David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Many types of coleus can now be used in the full sun as in this large planting at Epcot, providing a long sweep of dark red color to contrast with the chartreuse of the ornamental sweet potato vine, Margarita.

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How times change—and along with it changes come to some of our favorite plants. A few years ago coleus was primarily a plant for shady locations, along with caladium, hosta, and impatiens. Choices included such cultivars as Carefree with deeply lobed leaves, Fiji with ruffled leaves, or Dragon with gold-fringed leaves. The Wizard series was an improvement over the old Rainbow coleus because it had more compact growth and better branching. Other types were Saber, Brilliant, and Fairway. Many of these varieties for shade are still available.

However, new varieties of coleus have become available recently that far outdo their shade-loving cousins. These plants flourish in the sun—right out in the bright, open, middle of it. Most of them form few if any flowers, an improvement over old types, as flowers are unwanted on coleus. I remember coleus grown in previous years that put on so many flowers that the colorful foliage was hidden. No matter how often I snapped them off, they finally won the battle because they were so determined to bloom.

According to Dr. Allan Armitage of the University of Georgia, about 60 species of coleus have been identified, but only *Coleus blumei* is used in the garden as a landscape plant. Taxonomists have even decided to change this name from *Coleus blumei* to *Solenostemon scutellarioides*. Well, thanks, anyhow, but I think I will just stick with coleus.

Several varieties are found in garden centers, and all are excellent landscape plants. I have added several of these to my borders for the last few years. Their performance is remarkable. All summer long, in sun or part shade, these plants provide a colorful addition to the border. They put on a show with other sun lovers such as fountain grass and lantana.

The Sunlover Series emerged in 1993, and includes such colorful varieties as Red Ruffles, Rustic Orange, Gay's Delight, and Thumbellina. Each grows quickly and adds bright color to flower beds during our long, hot summers.

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The Solar Series was released in 1994 from Hatchett Creek Farms in Gainesville , Florida Some favorites include Solar Morning Mist, Solar Sunrise, Solar Flare, Solar Red, and Solar Furnace. Several of these grow in my garden and work hard all season long, adding color and interest to the border. The Ducksfoot Series has foliage that reminds one of ducks' feet. Relatively small leaves make this group more drought tolerant than some larger-leaved cousins.

Several independent growers have released their own varieties. 'Alabama Sunset' has mature leaves that are a beautiful, rosy-bronze color. New leaves emerge bright lime-green. I have three of these in an old iron wash pot near my entry. Growing to about two feet tall and four feet in diameter, they make a stunning display.

Marketing of the Florida City Series began in the summer of 2001. Such selections as Captiva, Okahumpka, Sopchoppy, Two Egg, Yalaha, and Elfers offer brightly colored foliage that withstands Florida 's heat and produces few flowers.

These sun coleus, as they are called, should thrive in gardens throughout the coastal South. Give them moist, well-drained soil improved with organic matter, and fertilize them as you do other annuals. They will respond by putting on a dramatic show. Pinching back the growing tips encourages bushiness and provides an easy way to obtain additional plants.

Propagation is easy. Simply take tip cuttings from actively growing stems that are at least three inches long. Remove leaves from the bottom of the cutting and place in a small pot filled with potting soil. Keep moist, and within ten days or so the cutting will be well rooted. In a couple of weeks it will be ready for transplanting into the garden. Coleus cuttings also root readily in water.

Friends who visit my garden frequently leave with cuttings from my coleus plants. In a few weeks they, too, will have these beautiful plants growing in their gardens. I'm hooked. You will be, too, once you try these colorful, versatile plants.

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