

# The Colors of Coleus



Not many plants can take Louisiana's summer sun and the heat like coleus (*Coleus x hybridus*).

***A native of Java and a member of the Labiatae family (stems are square), coleus have become a very popular house and garden plant prized for their colorful foliage. This publication provides information on proper care of coleus—from watering and fertilizing to selecting recommended cultivars.***

## ***General Location***

Coleus do best where they get sun to light shade. Colors are more vivid in partial shade. Many cultivars of coleus are fully sun-tolerant; these are commonly called sun coleus. For optimum growth, night temperatures should range between 65 and 70 degrees F and day temperatures between 75 to 85 degrees. Coleus will remain hardy until first frost and are adapted for almost all hardiness zones.

Most coleus cultivars have a bushy, round growth form, growing up to 3 feet tall. The upright form makes them an excellent border plant. They can also be used in containers, edging, planter boxes, hanging baskets, bedding or carpet beds, and they're also great for underplanting. They produce predictable colors that can be used in combination with other

annuals or grown alone. Trailing growth habits are also available on some cultivars.

## ***Soil Conditions and Preparation***

Plant coleus in a porous, fertile, well-drained loam soil. Keep the soil barely moist at all times. They grow best in a soil pH of 6.5 or lower. Any soil suitable for bedding plants is ideal. If the soil has a clay texture, adding some sand or coarse bark may help. Prepare the beds a few weeks before planting if coleus are to be planted in new beds. Work the soil, preferably with a power tiller, adding amendments as necessary.

## ***Planting and Blooming***

The best time to plant coleus in Louisiana is spring, or when the danger of frost has passed. Coleus are normally used as garden annuals rather than as perennials because they are one of the first plants to be killed by frosts in the early winter.

The choice in coleus is unlimited. There is a cultivar for almost every color, leaf shape and variegation you can imagine. Colorful leaves in red, green, pink, white, purple and yellow are only some of the choices. Small insignificant flowers will appear in late summer. Remove the flower spikes to induce continuous production of new foliage. A plant usually stops growing when it starts flowering.

Plants grown in heavy shade may become straggly and need frequent pruning to maintain a low, dense form. Dwarf, more compact forms are also available in addition to the standard varieties. All varieties grow rapidly.

In late fall before the first frost, cuttings from favorite cultivars may be taken, rooted for overwintering and replanted outdoors the next spring.

## ***Watering and Fertilizing***

Watering is often necessary to achieve good foliage. Coleus do not tolerate wet feet, so make extra sure the soil has good drainage and that the watering is strictly monitored. Too much water will reduce vigor and make the plants more susceptible to diseases and root rot. In south Louisiana's hot summers, it's important to make sure the beds or containers stay moist but not overly wet. Modify the watering schedule according to growth and temperature.

Fertilize established plants once or twice during the growing season. Use a slow-release fertilizer at the rate of 1-2 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of bed area.

## ***Mulching***

Mulching is an essential part of good culture. Mulches serve many purposes,

such as maintaining soil moisture and keeping weeds under control. Mulching during the summer is not necessary, but recommended to control weeds and reduce the amount of watering needed. Coleus benefit from mulches such as pine straw needles, pine straw shavings, cypress mulch and pine bark mulch.

### **Recommended Cultivars**

Most cultivars available will deliver superior landscape performance. A few of many selections include:

<b>Cultivar</b>	<b>Color</b>
Alabama	yellow with red
Pineapple	yellow
New Orleans Red (‘Red Ruffle’)	dark red/cherry
Solar Series	numerous
Mardi Gras	reddish green
Plum Parfait	plum
Burgundy Sun	burgundy
Duck’s Foot	red/orange
Grasshopper	green

New Orleans Red coleus was a ‘Louisiana Select’ recipient in 1996; Plum Parfait and Burgundy Sun have been recognized for outstanding performance in Texas trials.

### **Pests**

Fortunately, coleus has no serious insect or disease problems when grown

outdoors in properly prepared beds or containers. The most common problems are mealy bugs and aphids.

Mealy bugs cause considerable damage, especially on plants growing indoors. They have soft scales with small segmented bodies. The egg sacks are usually located in the axils of leaves and appear in a cottony mass. They hatch in about 10 days and cover the entire plant. Wipe off a light infestation with a damp cloth. Severe infestations are difficult to control. Consult your county agent for control recommendations.

Aphids are sap-sucking insects that weaken the plants. Flowering pot plants are especially susceptible. The plant is weakened, and sticky honeydew is deposited. Control methods include repeated chemical applications.

Other pests with minor importance include mites and whiteflies. Leaf spots can also be a problem.

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