

Coleus

Origins and Characteristics

Coleus, also known as *Solenostemon*, is an herbaceous perennial native to the tropical areas of Africa, Asia, Australia, the East Indies and the Philippines. Although it is a perennial, most gardeners in the US and Canada treat it as an annual based on the zone changes it faces in North America.

Coleus belongs to the mint family (*Lamiaceae*), and both share a square stem and opposite leaves. With that being said, coleus shares little else with its cousin, in that it has a wide variety of growth habits, including an upright form, a trailing form, and a mound form.

The foliage can also vary in shape and produce many colours. These characteristics make coleus a desirable addition to a garden.

Propagation

The propagation of coleus can be achieved in one of two ways: by seed or by stem cuttings. For efficiency, a commercial grower will propagate by cuttings, saving time and money on labour, while a home gardener will likely grow by seed.

For seeds to germinate well, they should be sown for 10 weeks and be within a depth of .25 to .5 cm below the soil to meet the required amount of light.

Air temperature for the first week of propagation should range from 21 to 27° C. while week two should have 18° C. Water for germinating seeds should be applied only by a fine mist.

Propagation by stem cuttings is done by removing a 5 to 6 cm shoot taken just above a leaf node (cutting obtains two leaflets).

Once the cut is made, you may apply a rooting hormone although it is not required. In any case, place the cutting into a sterile medium with an air temperature of 21 to 27° C.; this should maximize rooting and decrease susceptibility to disease.

Care

If you have overwintered your coleus, it can be set outside once the temperature has reached 10° C. This should help to harden it off and make it sturdier. Coleus likes a slightly alkaline pH with a well-drained soil and should be fed monthly with a 10-10-10 fertilizer.

Pinching off coleus's center stem will induce a bushier plant while pinching off the flower spikes will trick the plant into producing more growth. Removal of the immature flowers tricks the plant into thinking its life cycle is not complete.

Uses

Although coleus can be used as an indoor plant, it has considerable landscape value and can be used effectively in a mass.

Besides coleus's ability to attract hummingbirds, it has also been used as a treatment for glaucoma, asthma, and high blood pressure.

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