

Coleus scutellarioides: Coleus¹

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This Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ publication is part of a document series originally written by Edward F. Gilman. Visit <https://FloridaFriendlyLandscaping.com> to learn more about creating and maintaining attractive landscapes that protect Florida's water resources and environment.

Introduction

Coleus is an annual or tender perennial with a rounded growth form, and height and spread of 1 to 3 feet (Figure 1). Coleus is grown for its brightly colored ovate leaves, which may be purple, burgundy, brown, red, pink, orange, yellow, and white (Figure 2). There are numerous cultivars with varieties of color combinations and leaf shapes. The flowers are generally considered inconspicuous compared to the showy leaves. The small blue flowers are clustered on racemes and are attractive to pollinators (Figure 3). Removing these flower spikes from the plant encourages a fuller growth form. Coleus makes a dramatic statement in mass plantings (Figure 4), or may be used in containers or hanging baskets; it may be a houseplant, used as edging, or as an accent plant in the landscape.



Figure 1. Full form—*Coleus scutellarioides*: coleus.

Credit: © Emily Serrano, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist



Figure 2. Leaf—*Coleus scutellarioides*: coleus.

Credit: Keighly Graves, UF/IFAS



Figure 3. Flower—*Coleus scutellarioides*: coleus.
Credit: Ryan Fessenden



Figure 4. Mass planting—*Coleus scutellarioides*: coleus.
Credit: Keighly Graves, UF/IFAS

General Information

Scientific name: *Coleus scutellarioides*

Pronunciation: KOE-lee-us scoot-tell-air-ROID-dees

Common name(s): coleus; painted nettle

Family: *Lamiaceae*

Plant type: annual; tender perennial

USDA hardiness zones: all zones (Figures 5 and 6)

USDA Hardiness Zones 3B-11A

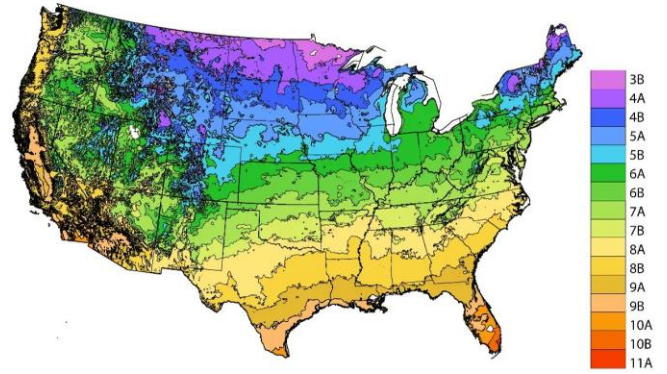


Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting zone—USDA Hardiness Zones 3B–11A; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.

Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/> for specific zone information.

USDA Hardiness Zones 7B-11A

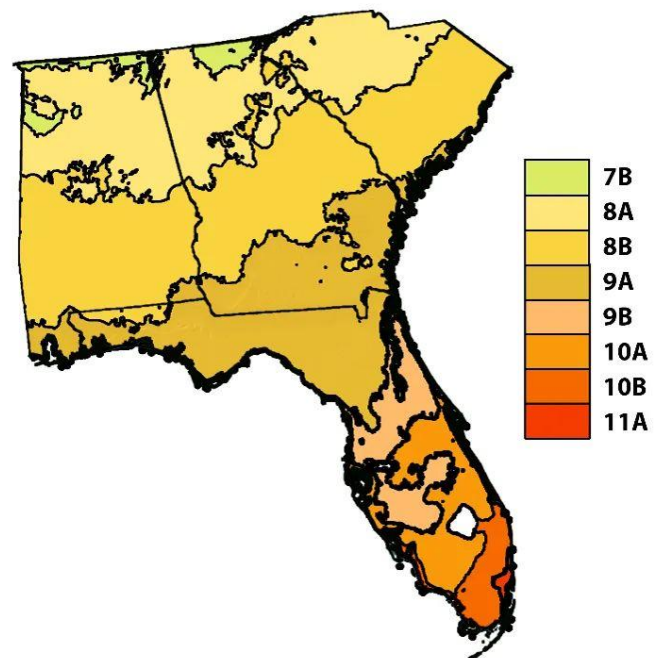


Figure 6. Shaded area represents potential planting zone in the SE Region—USDA Hardiness Zones 7B–11B; within planting zone but not pictured on map.

Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/> for specific zone information.

Planting month for zone 7: Jun; Jul; Aug

Planting month for zone 8: May; Jun; Jul; Aug

Planting month for zone 9: Mar; Apr; May; Jun; Jul; Aug; Sep; Oct

Planting month for zones 10 and 11: Mar; Apr; May; Jun; Jul; Aug; Sep; Oct

Origin: not native to North America

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Uses: mass planting; container or above-ground planter; edging; accent; attracts pollinators

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

Description

Height: 1 to 3 feet

Spread: 1 to 3 feet

Plant habit: round; upright

Plant density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: crenate; lobed; undulate

Leaf shape: ovate

Leaf venation: bowed

Leaf type and persistence: not applicable

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches

Leaf color: purple; burgundy; brown; red; pink; orange; yellow; white; variegated; depends upon cultivar selection

Fall color: not applicable

Fall characteristic: not applicable

Flower

Flower color: blue

Flower characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: less than 1 inch

Fruit cover: dry or hard

Fruit color: brown

Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: not applicable

Current year stem/twig color: green

Current year stem/twig thickness: very thick; square

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in partial shade; select cultivars grow in full sun; select cultivars grow in full shade

Soil tolerances: acidic; clay; sand; loam

Soil salt tolerances: low to none

Plant spacing: 12 to 18 inches

Other

Roots: not applicable

Winter interest: not applicable

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

Toxicity: this plant displays low toxic characteristics; leaves may cause contact dermatitis in some people

Use and Management

Coleus should be located in partial shade for optimal growth. Certain cultivars can tolerate full sun or full shade; however, careful selection should be used as full sun can lead to leaf bleaching and wilting. Coleus may tolerate full shade but will exhibit leggy growth. Coleus is adaptable to a range of soil conditions, but benefits from a moist, rich soil with slightly acidic to slightly alkaline pH. Plants may be pinched back at their nodes to encourage a fuller growth form. Coleus may be used in a variety of ways in the landscape including as a groundcover, used in mass plantings, as edging, as an accent, in containers or hanging baskets, or as a houseplant.

Coleus is propagated by seed and cuttings. Cuttings as short as two inches can be taken from newly grown shoots and rooted. The uncovered seed germinates in 10 to 14 days at 70°F to 75°F. Set plants outside after the weather has warmed. In USDA hardiness zones 8 to 11, coleus can be set out spring through late summer. Winter plantings are successful in south Florida in the full sun, provided adequate moisture is available. Coleus will freeze back in the winter and should be treated as an annual in cooler planting zones.

Design Considerations

Coleus is prized for its vivid foliage, delivering bold, season-long color in shades of chartreuse, burgundy, red, pink, and variegated patterns. Its upright, branching form and broad, textured leaves create an immediate focal point, making it highly effective for adding contrast and visual energy to shaded or partially shaded beds. Coleus performs well as a specimen in containers, a colorful border or edging plant, a vibrant mass planting for groundcover effect, or a midlayer accent in mixed annual or tropical designs. It pairs best with plants that complement or highlight its dramatic foliage, such as caladiums (*Caladium bicolor* and hybrids), impatiens (*Impatiens* spp. except *I. walleriana*), begonias (*Begonia* spp.), ferns, bromeliads (*Aechmea* spp., *Billbergia* spp., *Guzmania* spp.), and other low-growing groundcovers. It also works well with structural companions like ornamental grasses, or small palms that add height and form without competing with its color.

Pests and Diseases

Minor pest issues include mites, scale, mealybugs, and whitefly. No diseases of major concern.

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