

## Shopping for Plants, Seeds

When ordering seeds, keep in mind some general guides. Order only enough seeds for your needs. Otherwise, you will be faced with entirely too many plants or with storing the unused seeds. Ordering just what you can use and handle is one of the toughest problems most gardeners face this time of year.

First figure how many plants you will need. Then consult the catalog description to find the percent germination, and how many seeds per packet. The germination is important, since if the packet has enough seeds, but the germination is low, you'll want to order more. Some packets such as geraniums may only contain five seeds, as they are quite choice and harder to produce. Others may contain hundreds of seeds and be enough for several years!

When ordering seeds, consider the All-America Selections. These are new introductions that have been judged best by horticulture professionals nationwide. These selections are one reason to start your own plants, as many are quite good, and cannot be found at many garden stores or greenhouses. You can learn more about this program online at [www.all-americaelections.org](http://www.all-americaelections.org).

Catalogs and online Web sites, may also be used for ordering plants that arrive in the mail later in the spring. This is a good way to find many new and unusual perennial plants that may not be available locally. This is especially true if you are interested in a certain genus, group or niche of plants such as hostas or aquatic plants. If you have large garden centers and specialty nurseries in your area, you may wish to check their listings first before ordering from catalogs. Be sure to ask if the plants have a guarantee.

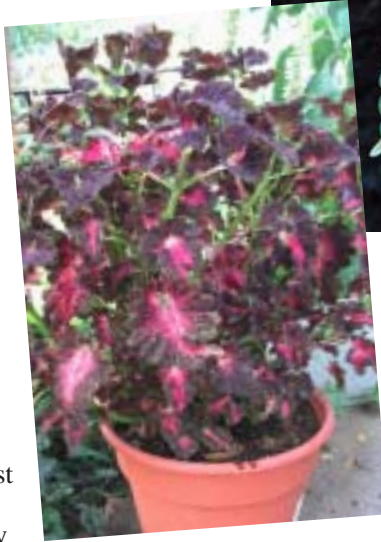
When ordering plants there are important points to remember. Order from reliable sources in order to get good value and plants that are shipped properly. Such sources are ones you may have used before or heard recommended by friends and neighbors. Beware of inexpensive plants. Price is often a good indication of quality and lower prices often reflect poor quality. These plants seldom resemble those in the catalog and they often die. (MJF)

## Colorful Coleus Make Good Bedding or Container Plants

Coleus are prized for their colorful foliage which may combine shades of green, yellow, pink, red and maroon. New introductions of this popular annual have been selected for increased sun and heat tolerance. Coleus vary from smaller types that will reach only one foot tall to tall bushy types of three feet. Sprawling types suitable for hanging baskets and window planters may spread up to three feet or more. Most coleus grow fairly rapidly to their full summer size. They are all tender annuals in Nebraska and will be killed by the first frost.

The brilliant and widely varied colors of coleus foliage make it a natural for use as a bedding plant and as a color accent. Coleus grows beautifully in containers, which can be used to highlight patios, porches and garden terraces.

Coleus are highly resistant to serious disease or insect



problems when grown outdoors in properly prepared beds or containers. Some pests to watch for include mealy bug, aphids and whiteflies.

Some disease problems to watch for include stem rot and root rot.

Most coleus will grow best in part shade. However, several new cultivars are available that will thrive in a full, hot sun. Coleus must have good soil drainage. Poorly drained soils and excessive watering will damage coleus. Over-watered plants will be stunted and root rot could occur. Plants should not be allowed to dry out. Coleus grown in containers are more susceptible to drought

and should be planted in a very well-drained soil mix that is watered more frequently.

Pinch growing shoots of young plants frequently to encourage and maintain dense foliage. For a midsummer growth boost, fertilize in June, July and August with a liquid fertilizer at half the usual dilution. Flower spikes will appear in late summer. Many people dislike their appearance, and if allowed to go to seed the plant will decline. Shear back flowers to extend performance. Since coleus are annuals and will be killed by the first fall frost, you may want to take cuttings of especially prized cultivars. They root easily from stem cuttings that are placed in containers with moist potting soil. (MJF)

## Bromeliads Need Strong Light, Warm Temperatures to Survive

The bromeliad is a member of a large plant family that is native to the warmer climates of North and South America. Bromeliads grow in trees, attach themselves to rocks and live on the forest floor. They vary in size from one inch to 35 feet high. Bromeliads have many appealing qualities, but their foliage is generally the most attractive part of the plant. Some bromeliads have several bands or variegations on their leaves, which exhibit different color patterns. Along with their attractive foliage, bromeliads also develop beautiful flowering stalks that are vivid, unique and bold. Pineapple is an example of a fruiting bromeliad.

Bromeliads need strong light to grow well and produce flowers. You must have a very well-lit area in your home to grow these plants properly, although you can use artificial light. Most bromeliads have a natural reservoir that's formed by the leaves, which are arranged in a vase like shape with overlapping bases. This reservoir holds a large amount of water, so be careful not to over-water your bromeliad or you may rot the roots.

Because most bromeliads originated in the tropics, they



need very warm temperatures to survive and grow well. Keep your room temperature at 70° F during the day and 55 to 60° F at night.

Bromeliads can be fertilized every three or four weeks with a half-strength mixture of all-purpose soluble fertilizer. This weak fertilizer can be placed directly in the receptacle cups of your bromeliad. Roots do not need to be fertilized as frequently. The soil should supply moisture to your plant without getting too soggy. The soil should also be porous enough to allow water to drain off easily and allow air to reach

the roots.

You can force bromeliads to bloom easily by using a healthy, mature plant with a good root system. First, drain all water from the plant and place the plant inside a clear, airtight plastic bag with a large ripe apple. Ripe apples give off a gas called ethylene, which triggers the formation of flowers on bromeliads. After two to three days, remove the plant from the bag and replace the water you removed. Depending on the type of plant you have, flowering will begin in six to fourteen weeks. (MJF)

## Garden Guide

### Things to do this month

Order perennial plants and bulbs now for cut flowers this summer. Particularly good choices are phlox, daisies, coreopsis, asters and lilies.

Check stored bulbs, tubers and corms. Discard any that are soft or diseased.

Order gladiolus corms now for planting later in the spring after all danger of frost has passed. Locate in full sun in well-drained soil.

Branches of forsythia, pussy willow, quince, spirea and dogwood can be forced for indoor bloom. Make long, slanted cuts when collecting the branches and place the stems in a vase of water. Change the water every four days. They should bloom in about 3 weeks.

Check any vegetables you have in storage. Dispose of any that show signs of shriveling or rotting.

This year plan to grow at least one new vegetable that you have never grown before; it may be better than what you are already growing. The new dwarf varieties on the market which use less space while producing more food per square foot may be just what you are looking for.

Send off seed orders early this month to take advantage of seasonal discounts. Some companies offer bonus seeds of new varieties to early buyers.

Do not start your vegetable transplants indoors too early. Six weeks ahead of the expected planting date is early enough for the fast-growth species such as tomatoes. Eight weeks allows enough time for the slower-growing types such as peppers.

Prune fruit trees and grapes in late February or early March after the worst of the winter cold is passed but before spring growth begins.

Late February is a good time to air-layer such house plants as dracaena, dieffenbachia and rubber plant, especially if they have grown too tall and leggy.

Check all five growing factors if your house plants are not growing well. Light, temperature, nutrients, moisture and humidity must be favorable to provide good growth.

Repair and paint window boxes, lawn furniture, tools and other items in preparation for outdoor gardening and recreational use. (MJF)