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## Pinch coleus for 'bushy' plant

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Courtesy of Carol T. Bradford

NEWER COLEUS VARIETIES are grown commercially from cuttings. Many are patented. Choose them for their foliage color, shape, size and plant form, upright or trailing. You'll find one to go with any wild color scheme you can imagine. The plants look good in mixed containers and beds, in sun or part shade.

### Garden tip

Start pruning any nice day when the temperature goes above freezing. The first tasks are pruning grapevines, renewal pruning of hedges, and cutting out black knot and brown rot from cherries, plums and peaches.

By Carol T. Bradford

Contributing writer

**Dear Carol:** I have a question about coleus. Do all coleus branch if cut back? I'd like mine more "bushy" rather than the straight, stalky way it looks now. Are there some that make better houseplants? — T.S., East Syracuse.

**Dear T.S.** Your basic coleus is a tender perennial, native to Malaysia and Southeast Asia, that is grown as an annual outdoors here for its vividly colored leaves.

Coleus can make good houseplants as well. The species that is commonly grown is now called *Solenostemon scutellarioides*. The genus name used to be *Coleus*, hence the common name. It was reclassified a few years ago, but few people use the new Latin name, understandably.

Coleus belong to the mint family and grow vigorously. They have opposite leaves, and all of them respond to pinching by sending out two new shoots from the top nodes. Repeated pinching will develop a bushy plant. The stems of many varieties can become quite rigid with age, so you can even make a little coleus "tree" by staking a long single stem, growing it to the desired height — perhaps 18 inches — and then pinching to form a rounded lollipop head.

There are a lot of coleus varieties, each one gaudier than the last. They can be upright or trailing. Some have large leaves and others small, and the heights range from just a few inches high to around 3 feet.

The plants can easily be grown from seed or from cuttings, depending on the variety. The seed mixes are often good value. Many seed catalogs carry them. They contain a range of different-colored and -shaped types.

Some mixes are suitable for containers; others for bedding. The seeds need light to germinate. Start them indoors about eight to 10 weeks before transplanting. Don't let the seedlings dry out too much, as they have thin leaves and will wilt terminally. Good air circulation (a small fan) can help prevent mildew diseases from taking hold.

There's not much point in looking for specific coleus varieties at the garden center, as there are so many. Institutions around the country conduct annual trials every summer to see what does well and what doesn't.

Last summer, *Coleus Redhead* and *Coleus Versa Crimson to Gold* got top scores at Cornell University's Bluegrass Lane Research Center in Ithaca. There was quite a spread between the high-scoring and the low-scoring cultivars, but if you need a certain color, then go for it.

Coleus flowers may appear during the season. They can be pinched off ASAP, as they do nothing for the plant's looks.

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