

# The American GARDENER

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### Plant In The Spotlight

Patricia A. Taylor

Redhead Coleus Sails Through Summer Heat

LIKE MANY garden communicators, I often receive samples of new varieties from plant development or marketing companies to test out in my garden. This perk has its pluses and minuses. On the one hand, it can be fun to try new introductions before they are readily available. On the other hand, we are obligated—if we want to receive more samples—to grow plants that we may not particularly like.

Last spring, the packing slip on a box of sample plants I received listed a coleus called Redhead among the offerings. I wasn't thrilled because, in my experience, these generally multi-colored, often frilly annuals are sometimes difficult to harmoniously place in mixed borders.

#### STUNNING COLOR

When I opened the box, however, I was immediately smitten with a six-pack of the most beguiling red foliage plants I have ever come across. Apparently, my reaction was not unusual. Mary O'Connor, global product manager for Ball Horticultural Company, which developed the plant, says she felt the same way when she saw it growing in one of the firm's trial fields. "It's like a beautiful redhead," she thought—and that's how the plant acquired its name.

In order to be introduced to the trade, however, the plant had to demonstrate more than beautiful color. O'Connor explains that with coleus, the goal of today's breeders is to create plants that are either late to flower or are flowerless, that resist downy mildew, grow in a wide range of light conditions, and elegantly sail through hot, humid weather.

#### BEATING THE HEAT

I was unaware of this when I planted all six Redhead coleus plants in mostly sunny sites in my Princeton, New Jersey, garden. What followed was a horrid growing season in the mid-Atlantic, with recordbreaking temperatures, drought, and air quality alerts. A variety of shrubs, trees, and perennials succumbed as a result.

Despite this, Redhead coleus thrived from May through October. The color of its large, narrowly serrated leaves was fabulous—ranging from an alluring pink-tinged red at high noon to a dark, luscious, winered in late afternoon sun. All the plants remained free of disease and flowerless. They were not fertilized and were watered only during the worst of the heat spells. When the occasional torrential downpour did occur, the plants stood tall.

And they not only stood tall—no staking whatsoever— they grew tall. Though Ball's marketing information describes the plant topping out at 18 to 24 inches with a slightly broader spread, mine reached a magnificent 40 inches. When I asked O'Connor about this, she thought it may have been because my plants were sent in small sixpack cells and thus had not been pinched back. Larger ones sold in containers would have been pinched to create a bushier effect, thus reducing upward growth.

Given that I've disclosed I got the plants for free, you might wonder whether I'm an unbiased observer. Well, if it helps, I'm not the only one singing its praises; Redhead coleus has received high marks in trials conducted at Franklin Park in Columbus, Ohio, and at Cornell University's Bluegrass Lane Research Center in Ithaca, New York. It's now widely available in garden centers, so you can try it and judge for yourself.

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