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Grow Some Sprouts Indoors



Photo credit: Pinterest. Paddocks Blog.

If the bleak grey days of winter have you itching to plant a garden, growing sprouts indoors may be just the cure for this. Sprouts are simply germinated seedlings of alfalfa, mung bean, soybean, lentil, radish, kale, funugreek, mustard, onion, cabbage, broccoli, etc. Each type of sprout has a unique flavor and some vary in color. For example, China rose radish sprouts have pink stems with a spicy flavor. In contrast, hard red winter wheat sprouts have a sweet, malty flavor, whereas alfalfa sprouts have a nutty taste. Sprouts of any type are a great addition to salads, sandwiches, or many other cooked dishes.

When purchasing seeds for sprouting, make sure they have not been treated with a fungicide. They can be purchased from a variety of sources including online sites or at garden centers and health food stores. Both organic and non-organic seeds for edible sprouts are commonly available.

Specialized germinators can be used to grow sprouts or they can be grown in clean, wide-mouth glass canning jars. For canning jars, a screw-top ring and cheesecloth or fine meshed wire are also needed. Use a separate jar for each type of seed because they vary in the time it takes for them to germinate.

To clean the seeds, first rinse them seeds in cold water. Next, immerse the seed in warm water in a sterile canning jar and

allow them to soak for 12 to 24 hours to prime the seeds for germination. After this, with the opening of the jar covered with cheesecloth or wire mesh and secured by the ring or a rubber band, drain the water off the seeds. Rinse them with water again and drain, removing any excess water from the container. Keep the jar in a dark place (or cover the top of the jar with foil) at room temperature at 68° to 72°F. Rinse the seeds two to four times daily until they are ready to be harvested and stored. After each rinse, make sure to drain the sprouts thoroughly to prevent growth of undesirable organisms. If contaminants are visible on sprouts at any time, discard them and maintain a sterile growing environment. Most seeds germinate and grow to an optimal size within three to five days. However, sprouts grown from large seeds like mung bean or chickpeas may require a few more days.

For a little extra color, put the sprouts in a sunny window for a few hours to allow them to green up. If you wish to remove the seed coats, take the sprouts out of the jar and place them in a container with water. With a bit of gentle stirring, the seed remnants will float to the water surface where they can be easily removed. Drain the sprouts again and use them immediately or store them in a sealed container in the refrigerator for less than two weeks. Thus, growing sprouts is a quick and easy way to chase away your winter blahs until those warm sunny days of outdoor gardening return.

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2015: Year of the Coleus



Photo source: Wikipedia

The National Garden Bureau has chosen coleus as its ornamental annual to promote in 2015. Thus, we now are in the “year of the coleus”. This colorful yet durable plant adapts well to a wide range of exposures and garden situations. Recent improvements made by plant breeders have brought about resurgence in popularity to this long-time favorite.

Mention coleus (the word is both singular and plural) to most gardeners and mental images of shade-loving plants with colorful leaves come to mind. Moreover, most gardeners today associate the name with one of several seed-propagated series of coleus grown for bedding plant pack sales in the spring. Coleus have long been 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, turning coleus into a “plant for all locations” in the annual garden.

The use of coleus as an ornamental plant dates back to well before the Victorian Era. Species of coleus are thought to be native to Indonesia and parts of Africa. Because

coleus has been cultivated as an ornamental for so many centuries, its exact botanical origin is unknown, although *Coleus blumei* is most likely involved in its parentage. For that reason, for decades the scientific name of this member of the Lamiaceae (mint) family was *Coleus x hybridus*. Plant taxonomists recently reclassified coleus into the genus *Solenostemon*. Therefore, the correct scientific name for the plant today is *Solenostemon x hybridus*.

Dutch traders are credited with carrying several coleus species to Europe in the mid-19th century, where plants breeders in various parts of the continent began to hybridize it. Each tried to create new and more wildly variegated hybrids than their competitor. As a result, new cultivars often commanded outrageously high prices in the market. In the 1890’s, both English and American gardeners adopted coleus with enthusiasm, both as a garden plant during the summer and a houseplant during the winter. Interest in this plant was so strong that the term “coleus craze” was used to describe the public’s enthusiasm for it during the Victorian Era.

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2015: Year of the Coleus

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Coleus is like a “comfort food” from childhood for most gardeners. It often was one of the first plants they grew because of its carefree nature. Later, many gardeners forsook coleus in favor of more ornate, “glamorous” species. Gardeners who have not tried coleus lately are in for a pleasant surprise, for great improvements have been made. The primary fault of coleus from yesteryear was their inability to thrive and remain attractive in full-sun settings. This was especially true for coleus propagated from seed.

Today’s coleus cultivars carry amazing sun and heat tolerance and are available in a broad range of leaf colors, sizes, shapes and textures. The variability in leaf color patterns is truly remarkable. Some cultivars exhibit solid leaf color, whereas others may feature splashes, blotches, streaks, flecks, margins and veins. Leaf color intensity may be affected by environmental conditions such as sunlight, heat and soil fertility. Bright sunlight tends to saturate colors and create a different appearance than that caused by part-sun/shade conditions. For this reason, the latter is the preferred exposure for most modern cultivars.

Of the several hundred cultivars of coleus on the market, about forty are considered to be sun-tolerant. The term “sun coleus” denotes cultivars that have been selected to tolerate more direct sunlight. Under these conditions, however, soil moisture considerations become even more important for good garden performance. As a rule, cultivars with darker colors tend to tolerate more sun than those with lighter colors. Morning sun and filtered afternoon shade has been shown to produce consistent foliage coloration, even for sun coleus.

Coleus should be planted outdoors after the danger of frost has past. They enjoy heat and dislike temperatures below 55 degrees F. Coleus tolerant of a wide range of soil conditions but good drainage is important. Poorly drained soil and/or excessive watering will result in stunted plants with dull colors and discolored leaf margins. Pinching growing terminals of young plants will encourage dense, compact growth. A mid-summer boost of liquid fertilizer at half-strength can be helpful in maintaining plant vigor.

When grown in properly prepared soil or in containers filled with a soilless medium, coleus is fairly resistant to

serious disease or insect problems. An exception might be mealybug’s affinity for coleus as a food source. Occasional pests include slugs, snails, spider mites, whiteflies and aphids.

Coleus can be used in many different ways in the garden. Cultivars with solid leaf color can make a dramatic impact in the mixed border. Coleus make ideal companion plants for larger species and help to “fill in” vacant space under taller plants such as dahlia. In contrast, cultivars having leaves that vary in color may be used to echo the color of neighboring plants with similar (or contrasting) flower and/or foliage colors. Because of the multi-colored nature of their leaves, it is hard to find two coleus cultivars that do not go well together.

Additionally, coleus make excellent container plants. They often are used as the fillers in the requisite thriller, fillers and spillers that every well-designed container should have. More robust-growing cultivars should be pinched regularly to keep them properly proportioned to their container neighbors.

There are many, many cultivars of coleus from which to choose. Available in nearly every color combination imaginable, they range in size from dwarf cultivars such as the Wizard™ series to giants such as the Kong™ series. Personal favorites of the author include ‘Alabama Sunset’, Colorblaze® ‘Dipt in Wine’, ‘Lime Time™’ and ‘Sedona’, ‘Electric Lime’, ‘Henna’, ‘Honey Crisp’, ‘Indian Summer’, ‘Redhead’ and Stained Glassworks™ ‘Big Blonde’ and ‘Luminesce’.

In conclusion, consider coleus as you begin to make your garden plans for 2015. New, colorful cultivars of this low-maintenance annual can be found that fit nearly any garden or container setting. If you have not grown coleus for some time you are in for a pleasant surprise.

Credit: Excerpts of this article were used with the permission of the National Garden Bureau.

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February Gardening Calendar

Category	Week				Activity	
	1	2	3	4		
Ornamentals	x	x	x	x	Winter aconite (<i>Eranthis</i> sp.) and snowdrops (<i>Galanthus</i> sp.) are hardy bulbs for shady gardens that frequently push up through snow to bloom now.	
	x	x	x	x	Water evergreens if the soil is dry and unfrozen.	
	x	x	x	x	Inspect summer bulbs in storage to be sure none are drying out. Discard any that show signs of rot.	
	x	x	x	x	Enjoy the fragrant blooms of the Ozark Witch Hazel flowering in shrub borders or wooded areas on warm sunny days.	
	x	x	x	x	Take geranium cuttings now. Keep the foliage dry to avoid leaf and stem diseases.	
			x	x	Sow seeds of larkspur, sweet peas, Shirley poppies and snapdragons where they are to grow outdoors now. To bloom best, these plants must sprout and begin growth well before warm weather arrives.	
			x	x	Seeds of slow-growing annuals like ageratum, verbena, petunias, geraniums, coleus, impatiens and salvia may be started indoors now.	
				x	Dormant sprays can be applied to ornamental trees and shrubs now. Do this on a mild day while temperatures are above freezing.	
				x	Start tuberous begonias indoors now. "Non-stop" varieties perform well in this climate.	
	Vegetables	x	x	x	x	Season extending devices such as cold frames, hot beds, cloches and floating row covers will allow for an early start to the growing season.
x		x	x	x	Start onion seeds indoors now.	
x		x	x	x	Run a germination test on seeds stored from previous years to see if they will still sprout.	
x		x	x	x	Don't work garden soils if they are wet. Squeeze a handful of soil. It should form a ball that will crumble easily. If it is sticky, allow the soil to dry further before tilling or spading.	
			x	x	Sow celery and celeriac seeds indoors now.	
			x	x	Sow seeds of broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts and cabbage indoors now for transplanting into the garden later this spring.	
			x	x	If soil conditions allow, take a chance sowing peas, lettuce, spinach and radish. If the weather obliges, you will be rewarded with extra early harvests.	
Fruits		x	x	x	x	Inspect fruit trees for tent caterpillar egg masses. Eggs appear as dark brown or gray collars that encircle small twigs. Destroy by pruning or scratching off with your thumbnail.
		x	x			Collect scion wood now for grafting of fruit trees later in spring. Wrap bundled scions with plastic and store them in the refrigerator.
			x	x	Grapes and bramble fruits may be pruned now.	
			x	x	Begin pruning fruit trees. Start with apples and pears first. Peaches and nectarines should be pruned just before they bloom.	

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February Gardening Calendar

Category	Week				Activity
	1	2	3	4	
Fruits cont.			x	x	When pruning diseased branches, sterilize tools with a one part bleach, nine parts water solution in between cuts. Dry your tools at day's end and rub them lightly with oil to prevent rusting.
				x	Established fruit trees can be fertilized once frost leaves the ground. Use about one-half pound of 12-12-12 per tree, per year of age, up to a maximum of 10 pounds fertilizer per tree. Broadcast fertilizers over the root zone staying at least one foot from the tree trunk.
Miscellaneous	x	x	x	x	To avoid injury to lawns, keep foot traffic to a minimum when soils are wet or frozen.
	x	x	x	x	When sowing seeds indoors, be sure to use sterile soil mediums to prevent diseases. As soon as seeds sprout, provide ample light to encourage stocky growth.
	x	x	x	x	Repot any root-bound house plants now before vigorous growth occurs. Choose a new container that is only 1 or 2 inches larger in diameter than the old pot.
	x	x	x	x	To extend the vase life of cut flowers you should: 1. - Recut stems underwater with a sharp knife. 2. - Remove any stem foliage that would be underwater. 3. - Use a commercial flower preservative. 4. - Display flowers in a cool spot, away from direct sunlight.
	x	x			Now is a good time to learn to identify trees by their winter twigs and buds.
	x	x			Branches of pussy willow, quince, crabapple, forsythia, pear and flowering cherry may be forced indoors. Place cut stems in a vase of water and change the water every 4 days.
		x	x	x	Watch for squirrels feeding on the tender, swollen buds of Elms, Hickories, Oaks and other trees as spring approaches.
		x	x	x	Maple sugaring time is here! Freezing nights and mild days make the sap flow.
		x	x	x	Begin to fertilize house plants as they show signs of new growth. Plants that are still resting should receive no fertilizers yet.
			x	x	Now is a good time to apply appropriate sprays for the control of lawn weeds such as chickweed and dandelion.
			x	x	Tall and leggy house plants such as dracaena, dieffenbachia and rubber plants may be air layered now.
			x	x	Save grape vine prunings for making into attractive wreaths and other craft objects.
				x	Late winter storms often bury birds' natural food supplies and a well stocked feeding station will provide a life-giving haven for our feathered friends.
				x	Encourage birds to nest in your yard by providing water and by putting up bird houses. Planting suitable shrubs, trees, vines and evergreens will provide wild food sources and nesting habitat.

Gardening Calendar supplied by the staff of the William T. Kemper Center for Home Gardening located at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, Missouri. (www.GardeningHelp.org)