

PLECTRANTHUS

— *Coleus' Cousin*



Textured, colorful foliage and a nice habit make plectranthus one of the best new plants for mixed containers.

By
**Richard
Schoellhorn**

With all the well-deserved attention that coleus hybrids are receiving for their landscape and interior-scape performance, it seems like a good time to take a look at some of the closer relatives of coleus that have the same strong characteristics and solid performance.

As with coleus, plectranthus are fast-crop annuals; salable almost as soon as they are rooted and tolerant of a variety of production conditions. As the primary interest is foliage, plants can remain in good condition on retail shelves for longer periods of time. Use plectranthus as you would coleus, although since leaf colors aren't as vivid, plectranthus will sell best as accent crops, foliage filler and mixed container materials. With the flowering types of plectranthus, schedule to make the most of the season and use for color and as value-added hanging baskets. In spring 2000, plectranthus was one of the plants of focus at the University of Florida trials and showcased at the annual May field day.

Plectranthus are like coleus and salvia, members of the mint family, with rapid growth, aromatic foliage and a variety of



Rick Schoellhorn

Why Weeds?

In our industry, things are changing very quickly as floriculture adjusts to becoming a commodity to the American consumer. It's really only beginning — we have a long way to go. In my view, the future of the greenhouse business looks a lot like the history of the American farmer, but nurseries have an advantage. We watched what happened to the small farmer; we know what is needed to make the transition; and we have excellent examples of successful small farmers around us today. So as we face the same forces shaping our industry, we can avoid a lot of the pitfalls that the small farmer faced.

This stuff has all been written before. Increasing market pressures will force the formation of major nurseries; these mega-nurseries' sole purpose will be to supply the demand for flowers at the retail level. As these large corporations grow, the small local nurseries are going to need to change as well. Small nurseries are going to need to develop specialized products and services that separate them from the mega-nursery. If they fail to do this, they will disappear because, to the consumer, they will become invisible. Quality won't be enough to save the small nursery; it wasn't enough to save the small farmer. The average consumer can't tell the difference between an average and a superior product...unless you are there to tell them the difference.

Don't get the wrong impression; the formation of mega-nurseries isn't evil; it is a fact of life for our industry, as is the development of the big box garden center. This is our future, it is the cost of becoming something Americans feel is a necessary part of life. Imagine how the corner market felt when the first supermarket came along — probably a bit like the smaller nursery feels today. The message is change; the medium is plant materials and services, and the whole thing is progress whether it seems like it right now or not.

So why a column on a bunch of weird crops that have small market share? Because they offer something different; they give smaller operations an edge in the market, and honestly, because I love



P. fruticosus

shapes and sizes. Like coleus, these plants will do well in the irrigated landscape, container gardens and indoor situations as long as light levels are high. In fact, many of the best known plectranthus are for the indoor market. Most plectranthus are used for foliage interest and have insignificant flowers, with a few notable exceptions.

With all the interest in new crops, groups of plectranthus are coming onto the market with profuse and very attractive flowers and green, aromatic foliage. The flowering plectranthus group is predominantly from South Africa,

where they are used as bedding and flowering hedge material. While the flowering mechanism is still being worked out, they appear to flower best in late summer as nights cool and day length begins to shorten, which in north Florida,

is around October first. Timing schedules for the flowering plectranthus are still a bit sketchy, but the industry should be able to get a winter/spring flowering crop and perhaps another in the late summer and fall.

SUGGESTED VARIETIES

The best-known flowering form in our industry is ‘Mona Lavender’ from Ball Floraplant. This plant has a great form for containers and hanging baskets. Mona forms a low mound, requires a pinch in



these plants. While all these giant operations are forming and learning how to

control big markets, there is a lot of money to be made by personalizing what you do. I think a conservative adoption of new crops is a good first step in differentiating your nursery from your competition. It's only a step though, because you'll need to know how to use these plants, how to present them differently and how to provide services that augment your original crops.

So this column is here to promote new crops. Not all of them will work for you, but some will, and by carrying them as part of your crop mix, perhaps you'll attract a few new customers. New crops are always a complicating factor in nursery production. They cause problems; they sometimes fail; but every production nursery should develop a crop experiment program, because it keeps you thinking about change. Also, getting new crops out in the press raises the awareness of our industry's plant breeders.

This column will also promote the new markets that are always coming along and offer ideas to nurserymen looking for niche markets. So I hope you enjoy this concept column, and I'll try to make something productive out of my 15 minutes of fame by giving you some ideas — some reminders — that there's always something new coming down the pipes. If there's a group of plants you'd like to hear more about, please contact me, and I'll work on getting some of the basics out to you.

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production to get the best shape and flowers profusely from all nodes. While Mona has deservedly the best recognition of the flowering types, there are many other notable varieties. Some other forms currently in southern region trade include

plectranthus ecklonii, which reaches a height of 4-5 feet and flowers with a rich, blue-purple, 6-inch spike from all terminals, and *plectranthus ecklonii* ‘Erma’, a pink flowered form. Both plants are annuals, even in north Florida, but add strong color

to the fall landscape. They can tolerate full sun, but foliage is best when some protection from strong sun is provided. As a side note, the “fragrance” of the foliage is probably a bit of an exaggeration; stench might be more accurate. We nicknamed



these plants “Smelly Dog Plant”, as the foliage odor was pretty close that of a wet dog. However, this name actually stimulated interest in the plant; it was one of the most popular plants in the Milton trials.

Foliage types of plectranthus vary a lot in growth habit and form but are predominantly colored in shades of green, gray-green to silver and white, the most common of these forms being *plectranthus amboinicus* — Cuban Oregano. While this is not a “true” oregano, the foliage is highly aromatic, and the leaves are generally white edged with green centers. Growth habit for Cuban Oregano is loosely upright or mounding, reaching a height of 24 inches in the landscape. This plant will sport back to a solid green form, so propagators need to keep an

Production guidelines for plectranthus:

Fertilization. 150 ppm liquid feed or a low level of slow release.

Watering. Normal production irrigation, drought stress works to slow growth.

Media. All commercial peat lite medias work fine, pH 6-7, high EC will reduce growth and leaf size.

Production Temperatures. Ranges of 50-85° F are best, below 50° F growth slows dramatically.

Light level. Plants are pretty flexible in most cases, 2,000-5,000 foot candles is ideal.

Propagation. All are propagated by cuttings, which root in 5-10 days. Seed for rarer species is available from suppliers in South Africa.

Crop timing. For a 4-inch pot, 4-6 weeks; hanging baskets (3-5 cuttings per) take 8-10 weeks.

Flowering. With flowering varieties, flowering is related to SD photoperiod and reinforced by cool night conditions.

rick's weed-read

eye on stock plants as the green form is much more vigorous than the variegated form. Allan Armitage, and the University of Georgia, released ‘Athens Gem’, a tri-color variegation that is quite nice. Try using Cuban Oregano in mixed containers for sturdy summer foliage color, as an annual in the landscape and pared with herbs (although few cooks use it twice...).

A close companion to Cuban Oregano is *plectranthus forsteri*

‘albo-marginatus’, Forster’s *plectranthus*. This is also a green-white variegated form but with larger leaves, a more upright growth habit and a more refined look to the plant. Leaves are corrugated olive green with a clean white border. Plants rarely flower and have a better growth habit in the landscape than Cuban oregano.

Plectranthus argentatus is a strong, upright, solid gray species. This is a horsy large plant with matt silver foliage, similar to ‘Dusty Miller’, though not as bright a gray. The plant lends itself to landscape use very nicely in much the same way as Dusty Miller but with larger and faster growing. In mixed containers, this plant will take over if you don’t use vigorous plants in the mix with it.

For hanging basket culture, there are quite a few *plectranthus* to choose from and all of these work equally well in mixed containers. Most of these plants flower sporadically in late summer, but they

hold onto their leaves, so flowering is a good thing in this case, unlike coleus.

Plectranthus australis (verticillatus), Swedish Ivy, is an old standard houseplant and hanging basket plant that has literally been hanging around for years — and for good reasons; it holds up well with the average consumer’s care or lack thereof. Consider working this plant into your hanging basket and mixed container schedules; it is fast, has glossy green leaves, takes shade and always looks good. This is definitely one to avoid full hot sun, as the leaves will scorch.

Plectranthus oertendahlii, Creeping Coleus, and *plectranthus fruticosus* are two *plectranthus* with purple-toned foliage. In the industry, these two plants are often confused with one another and sold synonymously. However, *P. oertendahlii* is a smaller leaved plant with prominent silver veins on a purple-green leaf, and *P. fruticosus* has larger leaves and a more general purple tone overall. Both are strong hanging basket plants and add purple tones to mixed containers.

Plectranthus madagascariensis, Variegated Mint Leaf, is another old time plant making a come back because it takes bright light, grows fast and easy, and has an arching, creeping growth habit that works in both baskets and mixed containers. Green leaves reach up to 1 inch in diameter with clear white margins, and the plant will grow to 3 feet in diameter in a season. It is a strong performer in the southern landscape as well as in containers. Unlike many of the other *plectranthus*, which can be gangly without a pinch, this plant has a good, dense growth habit and looks good all the time.

The variety of textures, colors and forms available to growers make *plectranthus* a crop we should all consider adding this spring. GPN

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P. ecklonii



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