



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Cool Color Plants for the Shade

You should write about color for the shade! It's hard to get nice flowers where you don't have sunshine.

For a long time, the answer was simple: Impatiens.

The arrival of downy mildew on bedding impatiens in 2008 sent growers and breeders scrambling for alternatives for shade color. Great beds of annual color aren't as big a deal here as they are in other parts of the country. But impatiens had the greatest range of color and had become the #1 selling bedding plant in much of the country.

Downy mildew spread from production growers out into the bedding plant industry, infecting beds of impatiens all across the country. The disease practically melts down the plants, destroying them very rapidly and the fungal 'resting' spores remain in the soil for years. Many garden centers simply stopped selling the compact bedding *Impatiens walleriana*. The disease does not affect New Guinea impatiens, including the SunPatiens variety, but those don't have the tight growth habit that creates maximum color impact.

This is big business. The floriculture industry (bedding plants, flowering plants, cut flowers and houseplants) was \$4.37 billion in 2015. California was the leading state with over a billion dollars in sales. Bedding plants accounted for 44% of the industry total. So, when a mainstay of a multi-billion dollar industry gets hit, growers and breeders get moving. Some of them sought the perfect cocktail of fungicides to manage the disease. None really worked.

In January of this year, Ball Horticultural announced the "successful sequencing and assembly of the *Impatiens walleriana* genome," a major step forward in possibly developing resistant impatiens varieties.

Meanwhile, other breeders and growers simply looked for alternative plants. Fibrous begonias? Reliable, but they only come in pink, red, and white. Ivy geraniums do ok in some shade. Coastal favorites such as tuberous begonias and fuchsias are a little fussy in dry interior regions.

Other choices

Sometimes it pays to look back. The 1970's may not have given us much of note culturally speaking (disco?), but it was the Golden Age of Houseplants. In my dorm room (Primero on Russell Blvd) I grew creeping charlie, spider plant, purple passion vine, inch plant, Moses in a cradle, pink polka dot plant and coleus.

Coleus blumei was its official Latin binomial then. Now it is renamed to *Plectranthus scutellarioides*, and coleus is the common name. For a while the new name was *Solenostemon scutellarioides*. Confusing as these name changes may be to the public, plant taxonomists have reasons for them, largely based on precedence (who named it first) and molecular phylogenetics (genetic similarities of compared plants).

Coleus grows indoors. But it also grows outdoors in the shade during the warm season. We grow coleus for the brightly colored leaves, with the spikes of blue flowers being a nice bonus. For many years coleus came from seed strains, selected breeding lines with mixes of colors of reasonably uniform height. Selection then developed solid colors within those strains.



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Those older strains of coleus got to be pretty tall and somewhat rangy. We'd pinch and trim and deadhead to keep them bushy. Plant breeders began selecting and hybridizing for compact growth habit, different leaf shapes, and more consistent color range. They also discovered that some consumers were willing to pay a little more for cutting-grown plants (clones) in order to get the exact color they wanted.

Now we have coleus in all sizes: big leaves, small leaves, upright, trailing, mixed colors, solid colors, leaves with gaudy blotches and venation and striping. One recent availability list from a very small grower had three dozen varieties. Yes, you can still grow it as a houseplant, though it'll be stretchier than it would outdoors. Coleus is killed by frost, so if you have a particular plant you really like, just take a cutting in fall and keep it as an indoor plant until spring. Coleus likes bright shade and is fine in full morning sun as well, providing bright color all summer and fall.

Polka dot plant (*Hypoestes*)

The success of coleus led growers to consider another novelty plant from the 1970's, the pink polka dot plant. This funny little plant that I grew on my windowsill is now being sold for outdoor color. As the name suggests, the leaves feature spots of bright, light pink that look like splattered paint. Now available in red- and white- polka dot versions as well, the care and use are basically the same as for coleus.

Caladium

So you want really bright, gaudy leaves? Caladiums are among several related plants called elephant ears due to the large, heart-shaped leaves. Nurseries always used to sell caladiums as tubers in springtime to be planted in shade for summer color. Over time, sales of anything in bulb form have declined to the point that many have stopped carrying them that way. Now you can find them growing in 4" pots in early summer.

Like coleus, these give a lot of colorful bang for the buck. The flowers, which are inconsequential, just look like miniature calla lilies (caladiums and callas are in the same plant family). And like coleus, they can be grown as houseplants in a bright window. But their real impact is outdoors, and the colorful leaves show off even in fairly heavy shade.

Most gardeners treat caladiums as annuals, discarding them after frost kills the tops. But the tubers can be saved with some care. Dig them up, shake off the soil, and set them on trays or newspaper in your garage. Cold and wet are the enemies of caladium bulbs. Plant them out again in late spring.

Ornamental sweet potato (*Ipomoea*)

A newer introduction in the world of bright foliage is *Ipomoea batatas*. You know it as sweet potato, and if you've ever grown those Thanksgiving favorites you know that the tubers arise from a very, very vigorous, leafy vine. A few years ago, plant breeders selected some forms with vivid chartreuse, elegant purple-black, or strikingly mottled leaves, to be grown as ornamentals. The lime-green versions really stand out in shade; the dark purple forms make great backdrops for coleus and caladiums.



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These are very easy to grow in sun or shade, just requiring a little trimming to keep them in bounds. The flowers are pretty but not very showy. The botanically curious may note their resemblance to morning glory flowers. Sweet potato is in the same genus.

We are often asked if it makes an edible tuber. Yes, but it is mostly starch and not very palatable.

Or as they say at the Proven Winners website:

“Commercial sweet potatoes have been bred for over 100 years selecting for those with the best sugar to starch content (hence the name SWEET Potato). The ornamentals have been bred to produce good leaves and no tubers. Though they do form, they are composed of almost pure starch and no sugar, making them a poor choice for eating. So yes, you can eat the tubers, but don't expect anyone to come back for seconds!”

We get letters.... Follow-up notes on shade trees

Via USPS:

“Dear Mr. Shor,

I read your latest, 7-25-18, article on choosing a shade tree.

I have NOT had the experience you describe with my birches.

Mine were planted in either 1977 or '78 by my ex. There were 3 birches. One died early on but the other two are still living. I don't ever remember giving them much water. Maybe when they were younger and maybe when I'd water whatever else was planted in the area. But for years now I haven't watered them and they just keep going!!

Sincerely,

Bette _____

P.S. Good underground H2O?”

I'm certainly always happy to get feedback about trees that are doing well! Yes, it's getting good H2O from somewhere. I'd say these trees are tapping into a nearby water source, whether a lawn or a neighbor's watering, but even at that four decades is a good run for white birches. May they celebrate many more, and thanks for the letter.

In a similar vein, I get asked why I don't recommend a particular species of tree “since there's a great example on _____ street that looks like it's doing well.”

In some cases, I am simply trying to help people avoid the known drawbacks. For example, you can find healthy specimens of cottonwoods and poplars in some yards. You can also see how extensive and disruptive the roots of those trees become. The fact that the tree grows fine is to everyone's detriment in some regards.

Others are just usually short-lived or prone to some specific pest problem, have poor branch structure that causes limbs to fall, etc. For decades there was a beautiful weeping willow on the corner of 8th and Oak Streets. It lasted much longer than I would have expected, but eventually did have to come out. Weeping willows are known for aggressive surface roots, susceptibility to borers which can cause branches to fall and make them unsafe. But that tree was a wonderful, healthy example for many years.

My mother would refer to something like this as “the exception that proves the rule,” a phrase she was using in the loose rhetorical sense: the fact of an exception doesn't negate the generalization that weeping willows are too prone to borers and limb breakage and aggressive roots to be suitable trees in most yards.



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My term for some of these trees is that they are “strictly rural,” i.e., only to be planted where the drawbacks and liabilities (literally; trees do cause lawsuits) can be avoided because of the absence of nearby neighbors or structures. But I’m always happy to see the exceptions and to hear your feedback.



All together in one barrel: caladium leaves (lower left), coleus (top left), Ipomoea (lower right) with a fuchsia in the background.



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Vibrant leaf of caladium on a bed of chartreuse Ipomoea, providing strong color and contrast in a shade garden.



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Big bold leaves of caladiums and coleus.



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Lots of new coleus introductions on the market now. Here are some miniature types used to great effect in a planter suitable for the shade. Photo courtesy of Philip Nicklay, Viola Nursery and Greenhouse.



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Strange and interesting new coleus varieties! This is in the Under the Sea series introduced by Hort Couture, a breeder that sells to wholesale growers.



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Common in garden centers years ago, caladiums have come back in favor for their ease of care, bright leaves, and tolerance for shade.



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Cousins: caladiums in front of closely-related alocasia (elephant ears).