

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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The Plume, the Spike & the Twisted

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The distinctive, sometimes outlandish flower gesture of celosia comes in various forms: plume, spiky, twisty and even brainy. It's eye catching and it sells.

Worldwide, celosias sits in the middle teens of the B-tier of revenue rankings and it's been that way for a while. A major perk of the genus is heat tolerance.

Whether the dry heat of Phoenix, wet heat of Atlanta, windy heat of Chicago or the buggy heat of Boston, celosias perform.

Pictured: Sol Gekko Green is a bronze-and-green bicolor grown for its foliage. • Intenz planters designed

for deck and patio décor.

Well, not all of them. A celosia knock is fading colors as the summer wears on. By their nature, the flower head starts with vibrant colors, but eventually develop a muddy, mustard overlay over a season. Celosias focused on the garden responded with series that extend the lifespan of bright displays. Celosias for cut flowers, however, don't worry about the issue because their market has fundamentally different goals.

Still, cut flower growers buy starts just like ornamental growers. Places like Ball Seed's WebTrack put all celosias into one bucket, so it's important to pick out the garden series to get the garden improvements. Below are a few of the major series, plus some fun ones as well.

The *C. plumosa* look—Fine-feathered figures

Celosia plumosa is the look most commonly associated with celosia: tufts of plumed, feather-like cockscombs in fiery shades of red, yellow and orange. Series are tuned for small spaces like trays and packs with a companion series for larger containers like quarts or gallons with more elbow room. Plumes come in a wide range of vivid colors, including the classic yellow, orange and many shades of red.

Sakata, for example, has three series: Kimono is the smallest, Flamma is mid-size and Century is large. Their house style favors flowers that branch lower on the stem for a thicker plume or trident of plumes.

Benary, on the other hand, likes more of a slender, vertical column. Their two series have a taller stem with a plume higher on the stem. Glorious is their compact, while Fresh Look is for larger crops.

If you prefer the PanAmerican look, then you use the Ice Cream series for trays and packs, and First Flame for larger pot containers. All breeding houses follow this pattern for *C. plumosa*: a full family of colors targeting specific container sizes.

The *C. spicata* look—Spiky punk rock

Second of the major celosia groups, *C. spicata* has a spiky, gothic punk rock vibe. Intenz Purple is the Ramones of the category, often populating autumn programs in the 8-in. size. *C. spicata* takes more time and more heat to bulk up, but summer has plenty of both. Looking lush by fall, they're ready for back-to-school sales that kick off autumn programs in patio pots.

A significant market opportunity opens up for *C. spicatas* in the American south, especially in places where they plant pansies as late as November. A color gap opens up between the end of summer, and the winter pansies and *C. spicatas* fill it nicely. Seedlings bulk up in the summer heat, become prime for retail or planting in August or September, and remain big and colorful until frost.

C. spicata colors outside of purple are pretty unusual, but one series has them: Kosmos from PanAmerican. Part of their potted celosias, this series has the spiky look in the full celosia color range. This series is dwarfed to keep the normally beefy *C. spicata* habit more in keeping with the *C. plumosa* style.

The *C. cristata* look—Twisted & brainy

Third and nerdy, in a good way, *C. cristata* has two variations. First is the stiff, sturdy fan-shaped flower like the Twisted series. Available in the typical reds, oranges and yellows, these are taller plants well suited for shop-and-drop products in the summer and fall. This flower form is truly unusual, boosted by tall stems that bring it up and away from the foliage. The large, bright fan flowers start conversations.

Thicken that fan shape into a club or globe for the second *C. cristata* style. Dracula is the most vivid example—a blood red flower with a nearly black cape of leaves draping underneath. If you'd like to explore this flower form in more traditional colors, try the Concertina series from PanAmerican. It includes a dark leaf cultivar, as well as a very vivid yellow.

Recent trends and fun stuff

Seed celosias are sensitive to natural daylength, so their sales tend to peak in the summer and fall. For earlier sales in the retail season without using light-timing tricks, turn to series like Kelos Fire (*C. plumosa*) and Kelos Atomic (*C. spicata*), which ship from Beekenkamp as cuttings or callused cuttings. The spring protocol is different from the fall, so ask or download the relevant information.

After building the core of the program, add personality with some fun stuff:

- **Bicolor:** Coral Reef is a bicolor *C. cristata* with a sherberty swirl of color within its twisted fan.
- **Bronzy:** Sometimes these cultivars are broken out into their own names, like Burning Embers or New Look (larger)/Smart Look (smaller). Other series will tuck them in as a dark leaf variety like those found in the Floriosa or Concertina lines. When bronze foliage is present there's almost always a red flower over the top.
- **Foliage:** Sol is a series that presents celosia as a foliage-first plant. They take celosia's unique leaves and pushes them further. Gekko Green has bicolor leaves, whereas Lizzard Leaf is fully bronze. Both have large, overlapping and pointed leaves.
- **Wild and casual:** For a little gomphrena attitude, try out the Wild series from Greenex. Plumes are slender and

delicate to wave in the air. **GT**

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