



AMARANTH – COLOR IN FALL GARDENS, TASTY IN THE KITCHEN

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Many plants reach the peak of perfection during the cooler and shorter days of autumn. One species of underused plants that clamor for attention now are members of the amaranth family. Made up of about 75 different species, amaranths range from ancient food plants to vivid ornamentals to noxious weeds. Many gardeners find themselves pulling up a fair amount of pigweed in their vegetable gardens each summer. Commercial growers in some parts of the country (including a 2019 sighting in CT) are contending with the invasive Palmer amaranth that seems practically immune to traditional herbicides.

Fortunately, there are a number of amaranth species that are grown either for their edible leaves and seeds, or as unique, late summer blooming, annual ornamental plants. Most species of amaranth are native to South and Central America. Some have been cultivated for over 8000 years and served as staple food crops for the Mayan, Incan, and Aztec civilizations.



Red Amaranth. Photo by dmp2007

During that time in the 16th century, the plant was also used in their ceremonial activities. Sadly, when the Spanish conquistadors invaded Central and South America, they threatened to chop off the hands of any Indigenous People growing amaranth, as they feared that their ceremonial use of the plant would threaten the spread of Christianity. Plants were secretly grown, however.

The survival of amaranth plants came under attack again during the 1960 to 1996 civil war in Guatemala when state forces burned the amaranth fields of the Mayans in an attempt to oust them from their traditional lands. Jars of seeds were hidden until after the war when they were shared and replanted. Today, amaranth is recognized as a gluten-free, nutritious pseudo-cereal, like quinoa and buckwheat, and is becoming part of many healthy diets.

Some species are grown for their leaves and others for their seeds. Amaranth seed is considered a complete protein with all nine essential amino acids. It is high in fiber, B vitamins, calcium, iron, magnesium, manganese, zinc and vitamin E. The edible leaves are also nutrient dense. Plus, this species tolerates heat and drought, and may be just the plant to feed a hungry world in the face of climate change. Seeds can be cooked as rice or ground into a flour. Admittedly I have not tasted the seeds (though I have nibbled on the amaranth weed leaves in my garden) but the seeds are reputed to have a somewhat nutty taste.

The gardener in me is much more enthralled with the ornamental species of amaranth. My favorite species is *A. caudatus*, commonly referred to as Love Lies Bleeding. The plant sports long ropes of trailing blooms that remind me of Rapunzel's locks. The deep red variety was popular during Victorian times. Since then, coral and chartreuse cultivars have been developed.

For those who want their cake and to eat it too, Hopi Red Dye (*A. cruentus*), has edible leaves and seeds, and was grown by the Native American Hopi tribe, which used the red flowers for dye. The 4-foot tall plants are great for back of the border or even large container plants. Flowers can be used for fresh bouquets or dried and used in arrangements. The blooms do trail somewhat but are not as long as Love Lies Bleeding.

Two other members of the same species that just excel in autumn gardens are 'Hot Biscuits' and 'Autumn's Torch'. Blooms range from copper color to chestnut and are just a delight fresh or dried. These plants are also 4 feet or so tall so place them where they get the oohs and ahs they deserve. Likewise, flower stalks can be dried but should be harvested just before seed begins to set.

Making for quite vivid foliage plants are members of the *A. tricolor* species, most notably 'Joseph's Coat' with its dazzling red, yellow and green foliage, 'Illunimation' with gold and crimson foliage and 'Splendens' with narrow leaves of red and gold bursting forth like fireworks. These cultivars of *A. tricolor* are not grown for their edible leaves, but one can purchase others that can be grown as microgreens.

So, whether you're in the market for a healthy meal or a dazzling late season annual, do give the members of the amaranth family a look. Their versatility and good looks may delight you and add just the right touch of fall color your gardens need.

For information on growing or identifying amaranth species, or for other gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

