



Sensational Celosias

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Celosias are a favorite of many gardeners because of their bright, long-lasting blooms and their ease of culture. There are about 45 species of celosia, and they are members of the amaranth family. Like all amaranths, celosias are edible. I must confess I have never tried eating them but apparently the leaves and young shoots are highly nutritional and supposedly taste like spinach. One species in particular, *C. argentea*, is used in many parts of the world especially in Indian, Indonesian and African dishes. It is commonly referred to as Lagos spinach. Most likely some species as well as certain cultivars of celosia are more tasty than others.

Most of us would prefer to grow celosias, which are native to tropical America and Africa, for their gorgeous and unique blossoms. There are 3 main types of celosias to choose from when picking one for garden beds or containers: plumosa, cristata and spicata.

Plumosas are often called feather or plumed celosia for their fluffy, soft to the touch, upright plumes. Depending on your selection, plants range from 8 inches to 3 feet tall. A recent introduction is 'Flamma Orange' selected for its fiery colored 5-inch plumes and tolerance to heat and humidity. Plants only reach 8 to 10 inches in height. The 'Fresh Look' series is also quite popular with large plumes in red, gold and orange.

Spicatas are sometimes referred to as wheat celosia because of the cylindrical flower spikes. They range in height from 5 to 30 inches. Mostly the flowers are pink or violet some with a silver sheen to them. Two star players are 'Kelos Candela Pink' with shocking pink flowers topping burgundy foliage. This plant blooms late into fall and its hefty size – 25 to 30 inches tall with a 2-foot spread works well in flower beds as well as containers. 'Asian Garden' can get up to 3 ½ feet tall with long-lasting pink blossoms.

Most curious are the cristata types with their dense, contorted blooms that resemble the combs of roosters, hence the common name, cockscomb. Many times they look more like brains and there is even a series of crested celosias called Brainiacs. They reach only 6 inches high but have lush, vibrant 3-inch combs of gold, red and pink.

The smaller crested celosias are cute but for maximum impact both as garden plants and as cut flowers, give some of the larger varieties a try. My two favorites are 'Red Velvet Cake' with huge 5-inch wide in a dark red velvety color. The huge blooms of 'Kureme' are a combination of

soft yellow and bright cherry red. Both of these should be staked as they are top-heaving and can topple in heavy rains and winds.



Red Velvet Cake Crested Celosia. Photo by dmp.

All celosias take the heat and grow best where they can get 6 to 8 hours of direct sun each day. Soil should hold moisture but be well-drained with a pH of 6.0 to 6.5. Since celosias put so much effort into producing blooms from mid-summer through fall frosts, they appreciate ample fertility. Have your soil tested and apply fertilizer according to recommendations made by the lab or with no soil test results, follow the directions on the package of fertilizer. Incorporate fertilizers before planting and these long blooming plants would appreciate a half strength application towards the end of July. Be sure to water thoroughly when adding fertilizer during summer months.

Celosia seeds are very tiny – a thousand of them can weigh a gram – so plants are best started indoors 8 weeks or so before transplanting outdoors or purchase transplants. Wait until after the danger of frost to set plants in the ground.

For longer, continuous bloom, remove the older blossoms as they fade. I do find that especially with the crested celosias, the flowers produced on side shoots are not as large as the initial center shoot one, but lovely none-the-less. The plumosas have a tendency to self-seed so leave a few flower heads to mature at the end of season if this appeals to you. The young seedlings, which won't germinate until the following spring in late May, have varying colored stems that will correspond to flower color.

Flowers can be enjoyed in the garden as well as in fresh bouquets. They dry well too and make attractive additions to dried floral arrangements. Give celosias a try this year. There are so many to choose from, one is bound to add color and interest to your flower beds. For information on growing celosias or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home &

Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.