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Special Research Report # 455: Consumer Analysis of Mixed Containers for Indoor Use

David G. Clark, Ria T. Leonard, and Thomas A. Colquhoun
Institute of Plant Innovation, Department of Environmental
Horticulture
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611

BACKGROUND

Attracting and cultivating new and repeat consumers to expand plant consumption and increase sales is an ongoing challenge to the floriculture industry. Developing novel and desirable plant products that will attract new and existing consumers is vital to achieve this goal. Identifying consumer preferences and the factors that motivate plant purchases is needed to gauge the success of new plant products.

In recent years, mixed containers for patios and outdoor landscapes have become a highly successful commodity and have moved from being a trend to becoming a mainstay in garden centers and big box stores. To date, there have been limited efforts to bring the mixed container concept to the consumers of interior potted plants. This is mainly due to the fact that the proper combinations of plants to serve this purpose have not been put together in the industry.

This pilot study was conducted to examine consumer preferences for indoor mixed containers for holiday and/or seasonal use. It consisted of various mixtures of coleus, bedding plants, and poinsettias. Seeking a new indoor potted plant instead of a traditional one like chrysanthemum, kalanchoe, or lily, we chose to place potted coleus in each arrangement due to their extraordinary array of leaf colors, leaf shapes, and plant forms. Coleus is mainly used in the landscape or in outdoor mixed containers. However, like a chrysanthemum, it performs equally as well as an indoor potted plant, as our postharvest screening tests have determined.

Our objective was to present consumers with various mixed containers to determine if they would use them in their home for decoration. We were also interested in determining the potential use of coleus as an indoor plant and to determine which characteristics of coleus plants and mixed containers are most desirable to consumers.

MATERIAL & METHODS

Several types and sizes of mixed containers were assembled when plants were either at marketable stage, flowering, or at an appropriate size for the designs. Various plant combinations were arranged and placed in baskets or plastic tubs. Each holiday or seasonally themed container had a complimentary holiday basket color and/or prop used to accentuate the specific holiday (Figure 1). For example, a red basket was used

for a Christmas display and an American Flag was placed in the pot for a Fourth of July holiday arrangement.

The mixed containers were arranged so each of the four seasons was represented. Most mixed arrangements, however, had a Christmas theme and used a combination of poinsettias and coleus. We also included an arrangement that had a spring theme (Mother's Day, Easter) with bedding plants (pansy, marigold, lobelia) combined with coleus in a white basket presented with a bird house. The third type of arrangement had a Fourth of July theme using a red coleus and blue lobelia with a small American flag in the pot. An arrangement showing a fall/Thanksgiving theme using mixed coleus varieties was also included.



Fig 1. Examples of the mixed containers used to represent each of the four seasons for the consumer survey.

The mixed containers were displayed at the 2012 University of Florida Poinsettia Field Day and Student Sale. They were placed on two benches inside our greenhouse along with over one hundred poinsettia varieties. The general public, University community, and master gardeners participated in the field day. A survey was presented to participants, who after choosing their favorite poinsettia varieties from several groupings, answered questions on the mixed containers and coleus displays.

Consumers were instructed to view the mixed containers and then answer 6 questions (Figure 2). The last question on the survey had 5 distinct groups of coleus types (solid colors, bi-colors, lance leaf types, undulating leaf types and novels) and consumers were asked to pick their three favorite types. A total of 388 survey responses were tallied.



Fig. 2. Consumers of both genders and various ages took a survey on the use and preference of indoor mixed containers for holiday use.

RESULTS

The responses to each of the six survey questions were tabulated and are presented below. The percentage for each response is tallied for each question.

Question 1. Would you use a coleus plant inside your home for Christmas holiday decorations and displays (circle one)?

	Response	%
1	Absolutely not	1.32
2	No	7.89
3	Neutral	11.05
4	Yes	39.74
5	Definitely Yes	40.00

Question 2. Indicate which of the following characteristics of coleus plants that you think are important for in-home use.

	Characteristics	First choice (%)	Second choice (%)	Third choice (%)	Fourth choice (%)	Fifth choice (%)
1	Leaf color & texture	69.53	19.43	16.71	10.82	12.61

2	Ease of care	14.13	28.29	29.46	17.84	9.74
3	Long-lasting	7.48	28.57	24.56	21.64	12.03
4	Reasonably priced	6.37	12.86	20.68	31.87	17.48
5	Use in garden after home use	2.49	10.86	8.50	17.84	47.85

Question 3. Do you think the combination of coleus with other plants could be used for fall and spring holidays (circle one)?

	Response	%
1	Absolutely not	1.57
2	No	2.09
3	Neutral	9.69
4	Yes	47.91
5	Definitely Yes	38.74

Question 4. Which holiday would they be best for?

	Holiday	%
1	Valentine's Day	2.67
2	Easter	11.87
3	Thanksgiving	23.44
4	Christmas	20.47
5	Multiple holidays	30.86
6	Fall	5.04
7	July 4	2.37
8	Spring	0.59
9	St. Patrick's Day	0.59
10	Did not like	0.59
11	Halloween	0.30
12	Mother's Day	0.59
13	Father's Day	0.30
14	Sadie Hawkins Day	0.03

Question 5. Would you buy a coleus plant for inside your home (circle one)?

	Response	%
1	Yes	84
2	No	16

Question 6. Coleus can last >2 months inside the home and come in numerous leaf colors, textures and shapes. Please list in order your top favorite coleus types out of the five groups shown. (List group number)

	Favorite	First choice (%)	Second choice (%)	Third choice (%)	Total (%)
1	Solid colors	11.26	10.77	16.01	12.66
2	Bi-colors	31.32	25.69	22.47	26.52
3	Lance leaf types	5.22	13.26	16.57	11.65
4	Undulating leaf types	27.20	29.83	20.22	25.79
5	Novel/unusual	25.00	20.44	24.16	23.20

A total of 80% of the consumers surveyed designated that they would use a coleus plant inside the home for holiday decorations and displays (Question 1). The majority of consumers (69.5%) chose leaf color and texture as the first characteristic when considering using the plants indoors (Question 2). Ease of care (28.3%) and long-lasting attributes (28.6%) were tied for their second choice. The price of the plants was not considered a high priority. Only 6.4%, 12.9%, and 20.7% of consumers placed price as their first, second and third choices, respectively.

An overwhelming majority of consumers (86.7%) were of the opinion that combining coleus with other plants in mixed containers could be used for holiday displays throughout the year (Question 3). Their top three choices included multiple holidays (30.86%) followed by Thanksgiving (23.4%) and Christmas (20.5%) (Question 4). All the other major U.S. holidays including Valentine's Day, Easter, and Mother's Day had a negligible interest.

A total of 84% of the consumers said they would buy a coleus plant for inside the home (Question 5). The type of coleus that the majority of consumers preferred included the brightly colored bi-colored types with undulating leaf margins that were novel in appearance (Question 6). Solid colors and the thin lance-leaf shaped types were least popular.

CONCLUSIONS

Our survey results indicated that more than the majority of consumers would use and buy mixed containers and coleus plants for in-home use. The three most important characteristics when choosing these plants were: (1) the visual aspects of the plants (color and texture), (2) ease of care, and (3) their long-lasting qualities. Consumers indicated they would use indoor mixed containers for multiple holidays and, especially, for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Using consumer-assisted selection is a valuable tool to determine the plant characteristics that appeal to consumers. This information is valuable as researchers develop new novel plant products.

IMPACT TO THE INDUSTRY

The information derived from identifying consumer preferences assists in the development of novel and desirable plant products. It also assists in attracting new and existing customers. By providing a unique niche in the market, sales and profit can be increased throughout the floral industry.

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For additional information contact Dr. David Clark geranium@ufl.edu

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Phone: 703.838.5211

www.endowment.org

afe@endowment.org