

fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

For vibrant color and intriguing texture, nothing beats celosia.



Cultivated flames

Crested celosia is a cultigen—a cultivated, “man-made” variety, resulting from human selection—of plumed celosia, which is the wild, original type. Indeed, the name celosia comes from a Greek word that means “burning,” because the red-orange plumes were thought to resemble flames. The Latin name of the species, *Celosia argentea*, refers to the silvery color of the lightly furred stems and leaves; some celosias also have silver flowers. The vertically elongated plumes, which may also be compared to a fluffy feather, range in size from two to six inches. Plumed celosia may be listed as *C. argentea* var. *plumosa* or simply as *C. plumosa*.

The flower heads of crested celosia, also known as cockscomb (*C. cristata*), have an undulating, dense arching habit that mimics the topknot of a rooster. Crested types are typically three to eight inches across, but can be larger, depending upon the variety and the growing conditions. A third type of celosia, *C. spicata*, offers a flower head like a slender spike and is more rarely seen as a cut flower.

Celosia *Celosia argentea*

Vase life
5-7 days

Bunch size
10 stems or grower bundles

Availability
peak season is June through September

Colors for both plumed and crested celosia range from reds to peach, pink, yellow, orange, and light green.

IT'S NOT HARD TO UNDERSTAND why celosia—and especially the crested, “cockscomb” type—has grown in popularity over the past ten years and more. As a floral design material, celosia offers something truly distinctive. Neon colors, velvet texture, and wavy convolutions of form make crested cockscomb a standout among cut flowers.

Growers like it too. California grower Sun Valley Farms is traditionally a bulb grower, with production concentrated in the cool microclimates on the coast. But when Sun Valley started branching out into warm-weather crops that would do well farther inland, celosia was one of the specialty crops chosen, and it quickly became a good seller. “There’s plenty of

demand,” says Doug Dobecki, wholesale sales manager for Sun Valley. “We sell the Bombay celosia in eight different colors, and there’s a niche for each one of them.” Red and magenta are classics, but peach, for example, is popular for wedding work. Sun Valley celosia comes in five-stem bunches rather than ten, because the stalks are so big and thick—“bigger than your thumb,” says Doug. It’s a sturdy crop that thrives in hot weather.

Sun Valley celosia is greenhouse grown. At Wollam Gardens in Jeffersonton, Virginia, Bob Wollam grows celosia in the field. He raises both crested and plumed celosia, but—in line with current trends—he plants more of the crested type.

For growing out of doors, Bob Wollam prefers crested varieties in the Chief series to Bombay. Chief is bred by Sakata. “They took it out of circulation in the U.S. for three or four years, when it was only available in Japan, and it just came back last year after a number of us growers complained,” says Bob. Bob and others like Chief for its vibrant colors and

large flower heads. Other crested varieties that Bob likes are SuperCrest, “very wavy, like a great big Bombay,” and Kurume.

“One thing about celosia compared with most other flowers,” Bob notes: “as a grower you can save your own seed, if you find something really nice.” Bob turns this feature of celosia to advantage by separating the seeds from his plumed celosia crop by color. When you buy them, the seeds normally come in mixed colors. “I’ve saved seed in the colors I like,” says Bob, “so I have a burgundy, melon, and my own lemon-lime. I sow it in blocks so I don’t get a lot of cross-pollination. Then I know what I’m getting.” An exception to the rule about mixed colors is the plumed variety ‘Sylphid’, a beautiful light green, often available in monochromatic bunches.

In general, “the value of *C. plumosa* is not as high in the market,” Bob notes. “I sell a five-stem bunch of *crinata* for about the same as a 10-stem bunch of *plumosa*.” Commonly bound into bouquets rather than sold as single stems, plumed celosia also offers a shorter vase life than crested celosia. “There isn’t a tip to start dehydrating,” Bob explains.

Keep it clean...

Regarding care and handling, “celosia is easy,” says Gay Smith, technical consulting manager at Chrysal Americas. “All the varieties have a pretty thick stem, like rhubarb,” which aids in longevity. The thing to remember is that celosia is in the group that Gay calls “dirty” flowers, which includes sunflowers, ornamental kales, and grasses—“anything that pollutes the water fast. That includes field crops, which come in with a lot more dust, just because they’ve been outside.” Certain flowers also tend to release more organic materials into the water than others. Flowers with hairy stems attract bacteria that actually start to break down the stem wall.

“So with celosia your number-one issue is to get it cleaned up,” Gay emphasizes. It’s very important to use a solution that includes a clarifier, to check pollution in the water while the celosia stems take their first drink after being recut. “We recommend our Chrysal Ger-

bera pills,” says Gay. They are so called because “gerberas are the Mr. Clean of the flower world, incredibly sensitive to dirt,” as Gay explains; however, they are good for many other flowers besides. They include a type of slow-release chlorine, different from the chlorine in bleach, intended to keep the water clean while the flowers take their first drink.

...keep it bright.

A chlorine solution remains active for two or three days. The Gerbera pills can be used in water or blended with a low-sugar flower food, like Chrysal Professional #2. Ultimately, celosia also needs sugar to maintain its vibrant color. Too much sugar right away, however, while the stems are taking their first drink, can actually slow down water uptake, simply because sugar doesn’t move through cell membranes as quickly as water alone. Florists have options, Gay stresses, depending on how long you intend to hold the celosia: Start with chlorine pills, hold in low-sugar solution, then progress to full-sugar solution in the vase—or skip one or both of the first two steps if you’re planning to use the celosia right away.

With flowers like celosia, it’s also especially important to keep buckets and work surfaces scrupulously clean with appropriate cleaners. Keep sanitizer in a spritz bottle and use it on your work surface all day long, Gay advises.

With the right care, celosia is a high-performing cut flower: long-lived and loaded with personality. It’s not the queen of cut flowers—but it’s a colorful dandy in the court. 🌸

Care tips for celosia

- Purchase celosia when the flower heads are intense in color and fully formed. Avoid stems that have discolored or black-edged leaves, an indication of poor shipping or improper harvesting.
- Remove plastic sleeves and bundle ties. Cut one inch from stem ends and treat with a hydration solution following the manufacturer’s instructions. Then place in a tepid floral food solution and condition at room temperature for 1-2 hours.
- Store uncovered in a 38 degree F cooler with 85% humidity.
- Both plumed and crested celosia may be air-dried by hanging the stems upside-down in a low-humidity, low-light area. Bundle the stems with rubber bands into small bunches to allow for free air circulation. Dry time should be about 3-4 weeks, depending upon the size of the flower head and environmental conditions. Spray with a sealant to prevent shattering.