

What gardener wouldn't love to find a flowering plant that is fast growing, heat and drought tolerant, easily grown, unusual and beautiful? Do I have your attention? Add edible and nutritious to that list of desirable characteristics of the Amaranth plant and we have a winner for Florida gardens.

There are about 60 different species of amaranths, and there are many uses for them worldwide. Most are annual plants grown for their colorful ornamental quality, nutrient-rich edible leaves, or cereal grain-like seeds. These plants are not to be mistaken for wild amaranth weeds which are no strangers to many farmers and gardeners.

One of the best known ornamental types is Joseph's Coat Amaranth, or *Amaranthus tricolor*. This annual is a fast upright grower, often needing to be staked when reaching 4 feet in height. As the name implies, the colors of Joseph's Coat's large leaves are brilliantly variegated red, purple, green and yellow.

To obtain the best leaf color, ornamental amaranths should be planted in full sun, although some shading in high afternoon is acceptable. They grow well in acidic sandy soil that is well drained and they are moderately drought tolerant. Limit fertilizer applications, however, because their vibrant leaf colors fade when grown in rich soil.

Love-lies-bleeding, my favorite, is another breathtaking amaranth that can take its place as a specimen in the garden. Gracefully drooping branches laden with foot long chenille-like blooms make the 4 feet tall plant a spectacular focal point. The name of this plant can evoke emotion, but combine that with the sight of this plant in its full glory and you may shed a tear.

According to the UF/IFAS publication on amaranths (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/mv006>) a green form, *A. gangeticus*, is commonly grown for use as boiled greens. Young leaves and shoots, reportedly similar in taste to spinach, are ready to harvest about 3-6 weeks after sowing. These nutrient-rich greens can be cooked or eaten raw in salads.

*Amaranthus edulis* is a 'grain' amaranth, grown for the edible seeds. These seeds can be ground into a flour to make nutritious breads, noodles and pancakes. When heated, the seeds will expand and pop like popcorn for a crunchy gourmet treat. Many markets and health food stores carry the seeds and seed products.

Maybe your flower garden, edible landscape or vegetable garden has a place for amaranths this year. Join the UF Master Gardeners for a Spring Vegetable Gardening Workshop and get your garden ready. Where: Fort White Public Library on Rt. 47. Thursday, February 21<sup>st</sup> at 5:45pm. (Published 2-17-13)