

Plants to stand the heat

Coral bells are a ground cover that's pretty, hardy and doesn't require much watering

Question: I like delicate flowers and easy to grow plants that are more drought resistant than thirsty. Would coral bells be a good fit in my garden?

Answer: Coral bells belong to the Heuchera genus, a group of largely evergreen perennial plants in the family Saxifragaceae. Also known as alumroot, heuchera don't require much maintenance and can add texture and life to shady parts of the garden.

They are ideal candidates for ground covers, borders, paths, woodland gardens and container plantings and love to be planted in groups.

Native to North America, coral bells earned their name because of their cerise flowers. Clouds of tiny, bell-shaped pink, coral, red, or white flowers bloom in late spring or early summer.

Coral bells have beautiful foliage as well – in colors that include red, purple, silver and green. Some varieties even have marbled or patterned leaves. Foliage height ranges from 6-18 inches with flower spikes as tall as 24 inches.

Coral bells are short-lived perennials, so you'll want to divide the plants every three to five years in the early spring or fall to keep them healthy. Cut back any leaves that begin to look ragged.

Select a planting site with partial sun to light shade and well-drained soil. Coral bells also grow well in clay soils. Most coral bells are hardy in USDA zones 4-8 but if winter is too cold, the crowns can heave above the soil line. Winter mulching will help prevent the freezing-thawing cycle that pushes the plants up.

Coral bells have simple feeding needs and will thrive with a light amount of slow-release fertilizer.

Coral bells can be grown from seed or divisions. I've made the



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Ask a Master Gardener

mistake of pulling up part of a coral bell while weeding – but never despair! I carefully clean off the cutting and let it sit in a jelly jar with water and wait for roots to appear. In a couple of weeks, I take my cutting with roots and plant it with great success.

Common pests include the black vine weevil, which can bore into the crowns and roots of coral bells in late summer or early fall causing infected plants to wilt and droop. You should be able to see the larvae on the plant and remove them by hand and destroy them. If an infection persists, treat your plants with a mild insecticide or neem oil.

Rich in nectar, hummingbirds and butterflies are attracted to the coral bell blooms, which also make long-lasting cut flowers.

Coral bells are well suited companion plants as well. Consider pairing them with Japanese painted ferns, hostas, astilbe or lungwort.

Plant breeders have been creating varieties with improved attributes like larger and more floriferous blooms which make the addition of coral bells to your garden a great choice!

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541- 672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



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