



UConn
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE,
HEALTH AND NATURAL
RESOURCES

PLANT SCIENCE AND LANDSCAPE
ARCHITECTURE

UConn Home and Garden Education
Center
U-4115, 1380 Storrs Road
Storrs, CT 06269-4115
877-486-6271

www.ladybug.uconn.edu
uconnladybug.wordpress.com

For a Tropical Touch, Try Castor Beans

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center



Decorative palmate leaves on large, lanky plants give castor beans a distinctive tropical look to gardens and containers. Castor beans have been used medicinally and ornamentally for thousands of years. I began growing them a number of years ago around a wellhead after receiving anecdotal evidence that these plants repel voles. Apparently, Thomas Jefferson grew them for the same purpose. While the plants themselves were not much of a vole deterrent, the oil is made into a commercially available product that is sold today as a rodent repellent.

Their tropical look paired so well with late flowering, single-pink mums, large-leaved cannas, trailing nasturtiums, and pots of broad-leaved agapanthus and amaracrinums that I just replant them in this bed each year. Never have they had any insect or disease problems and this may well just be because the deadly poison, ricin, is found throughout the plant. This sounds much worse than it really is.

True, in 1978, ricin was used to assassinate Georgi Markov, a journalist critical to the Bulgarian government but this compound is mainly concentrated in the seeds. Oils from the seeds are pressed and distilled to this day without harmful consequences. As of 2013, 600 to 800 million pounds of castor oil were used on an annual basis worldwide. The oil is still used for cosmetics, lubricants, coloring products, plastics, waxes, polishes pharmaceuticals and fragrances. During processing, the poisonous compound is insoluble in oil and therefore, remains in the pomace during pressing. Older readers may recall a disagreeable dose of castor oil being administered to them as young children because they seemed a little off that day.

This does not mean some considerations should accompany the growing of castor beans in backyard gardens. Castor beans are in the Euphorbia family, the same as poinsettias. Both plants can cause a contact dermatitis in sensitive people who touch the plants. A number of my gardening friends grow castor beans for their exotic appearance and none has had any skin issues because of this plant. If you are worried that kids or pets might eat the seeds, simply remove the rather interesting but not very decorative flowers that are forming this month so seeds will not be produced, as they are the most poisonous part of the plant.

Castor beans are native to parts of Africa, the Mediterranean region and India but have naturalized throughout the tropics. They have been known and used for thousands of years. Seeds of castor beans have been found in 4000-year-old Egyptian tombs. The oil from the seeds was used as lamp oil and as a liniment. During the 18th century, its use as a laxative became popular.

In the tropics, plants may reach up to 40 feet tall. In my garden, they seldom get taller than 6 to 8 feet before the frost cuts their lives short although in the southern part of Connecticut in a good year they may reach 10 feet or more if happy. The huge leaves may be green or reddish in color, depending on the cultivar that is planted, and can be 1 to 2 feet wide. They have 5 to 9 pointed, toothed lobes so add a great deal of texture to the garden bed. Dwarf varieties, like 'Impala', can be placed in tubs or other large containers.

Castor beans really enjoy hot, humid summers. Place plants in full sun and make sure they get adequate water while becoming established. Pair the red leaf varieties with cool pink, purple or blue flowering annuals or perennials. The green leaf sorts combine nicely with hot red, gold and orange colored flowers. The description of these towering plants with hefty leaves is a bit misleading as they tend to be more open and thus allow in more light than one might think. Because of this trait, they can be underplanted to some degree or at least be expected to share the garden bed. Around my wellhead they are planted among a bed of single, clear pink mums and the combination of the burgundy castor bean leaves surrounded by pure pink mum blooms is really quite lovely –at least until the first hard frost hits.

The large seeds can be started indoors in April for transplanting outside around Memorial Day. They are generally fairly easy to start indoors and are attractively speckled, although some have compared their appearance to engorged dog ticks. If you only need a plant or two, seek out a local nursery and purchase transplants.

For those looking for that tropical touch, especially in late summer when thoughts turn to autumn leaves, school supplies and apple picking, consider where you could plant a castor bean or two. The plants are sure attention getters and September is prime time to luxuriate in their exotic exuberance before that long, cold winter sets in.

For questions on castor beans or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.