

4/9/2011 Copperleaf in the SHOW DOME

Many ornamental plants are grown for their beautiful flowers, but others are grown for their foliage. Copperleaf (*Acalypha wilkesiana*) one of those plants, and you can see it this summer in the Show Dome. One advantage of foliage color is that there is continuous color rather than only when the plant is flowering. The colors vary from leaf to leaf in shades of red much like the familiar coleus plant. Because of the variegated coloring in the leaves, this plant also is known as the beefsteak plant and Jacob's coat, as in "the coat of many colors" described in the Bible story. The leaves have a toothed edge and are generally heart-shaped. Even though the leaves will attract your eyes, look closely later in the summer for the inconspicuous greenish-white flowers that hang down in catkins from 4 to 8 inches long.

Unlike coleus, copperleaf grows into a bush in warm climates that can be more than ten feet high and quite wide. It is a fast growing and popular landscape plant in Florida and other warmer states. Here in Wisconsin, it must be grown as an annual or a houseplant because it cannot tolerate our cold winters.

Copperleaf is native to Fiji and belongs to the Euphorbiaceae plant family. The flowers of this family are unusual in that they have no petals or sepals. There are hundreds of species of plants in this family that grow in a wide variety of climates. Some examples that are probably familiar are poinsettia, crown of thorns, various spurges, cassava (or manioc), castor bean, and the *Hevea* species that provide natural rubber. These plants all have a milky sap, and many, including copperleaf, are poisonous. Some members of this family are adapted to desert living similar to the cactus family of the Western Hemisphere. Many of those adapted to the desert are succulent and have thorns. You can see examples in the Arid Dome. Look for labels with the Euphorbiaceae family name.



Image courtesy of Reiman Gardens, Iowa State University.