

My friend, Patrick Haight, called me one day last week asking if I could stop by his home and take a look at some unidentifiable plants he had growing in his yard.

As I customarily do when asked to help identify plants, my first response to Pat was a question, “Did you plant them, or did they come up voluntarily?”

Pat indicated that he remembered planting an assortment of flower seeds that he had kept for some time, but he couldn’t remember their names. I then asked him if he could describe the plants.

“They are about seven to eight feet tall with bright yellow-gold flowers on top,” replied Pat. Immediately, I thought of sunflowers, but Pat added, “The flowers look like feathery plumes.”

That description certainly eliminated sunflowers. I then thought they might be some variety of ornamental grass, but when Pat described the shape of the leaves, his description certainly didn’t indicate grass; thus, grasses too, were ruled out. The only remaining flower that came to mind was an annual ornamental called celosia; however, those with which I was familiar were only one to three feet tall. Scratching my head in bewilderment, I said, “I’ll be right over.”

When I initially saw these giants, my first response was to utter breathlessly the word, “Wow!” They were definitely celosia-looking plants, but these giants looked like celosia on steroids. I am six foot three, and these golden goliaths stood another two feet over my head. Their flowery plumes were well over one foot in length, and they resembled brilliant golden flames. They were beautiful. I shared with Pat that I thought they were a type of celosia, but never had I seen celosia that size.

Pat said, “Hmm, the name celosia does sound familiar.” Mystery solved, or was it?



Having scrutinized and photographed these beautiful behemoths, I headed home to investigate further. Immediately, I began my quest to determine their specific identity. Here is what I discovered.

*Celosia* is actually a genus name for a small group of annual flowering plants universally referred to as celosia and often commonly called cockscomb. The genus belongs to the family Amaranthaceae to which, interestingly, common pigweed also belongs.



Two main types of celosia flowers exist. One is *Celosia cristata*. This group has velvety textured flowers that are twisted, fan shapes. They often resemble corral or brain tissue. For some people, they resemble the comb of a rooster. Perhaps that is why this group has acquired the name cockscomb.

The other group is *Celosia plumosa*. This group is commonly grown for its fluffy, airy-textured, upright-flowering plumes. Colors for both flower types range from yellows, to pinks, reds, purples and oranges.

Celosia plants prefer fertile, moist soil and do better in full sun, but they can tolerate some partial shade. They are plants of tropical origin, thrive in heat, and are not capable of surviving Nebraska's winters.

Numerous cultivars exist in each group. Having checked copious resources, nowhere did I find a cultivar capable of reaching the height of Pat's flowers. They range in size from dwarf (only a few inches) to about four feet. I hate to admit it, but, for now, the mystery is not fully solved. Perhaps, you can help,

One thing I do know about these magnificent, mysterious monsters is they, like all celosia, produce millions of seeds and are known to self-seed. I plan to ask Pat if he will share some with me. Next year, maybe I can have some of these goliaths growing in my yard and when people stop by they, too, will breathlessly utter the words, "Wow"!