



## CLIPPINGS a weekly column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

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### For Immediate Release

#### **Avoid Impulse Buying of Garden Plants**

*Beth Ellen Doran, Iowa Master Gardener*

Garden experts advise against buying a plant without knowing something about it. I admit I'm guilty. I violated this rule and now am experiencing the consequences.

Late in April while perusing garden plants, I found two very pretty ornamental kale plants and, of course, couldn't resist buying them. For several weeks, they looked great. But then warmer weather arrived, and they bolted – shooting up a spikey growth in the center of each plant.

Soon, my low-growing ornamental kale began to take on the shape of a tiny Christmas tree, and with the recent heat wave, yellow or white flowers graced the bolt. Seed heads are starting to develop on one plant. The other plant is still graced with yellow flowers. Both plants definitely do not look like the plants I purchased!



Ornamental Kale sports bright colorful leaves in late April.



The Ornamental Kale is bolting and fading by mid-June.

The problem was I didn't know the facts about ornamental kale and its growth. Ornamental kale is a cool-season crop that should be planted in the fall when the temperatures start cooling down. If the temperatures are too warm, the plants become leggy and leaf color fades. Leaf color begins to develop when temperatures are less than 50° F and will brighten their color as temperatures drop to 20° F.

Second fact – to maximize the lifespan of ornamental kale, look for plants that are not root-bound or overgrowing their containers. Ornamental kale will generally not get much bigger after they are planted, and particularly if the roots are pot-bound. Both of my plants increased in height due to bolting but not in diameter.

Ornamental kale may or may not be edible. Do not eat the leaves or flowers if the plant was treated with a pesticide or if you do not know if a pesticide was applied. There is another reason to avoid eating ornamental kale – the leaves have a bitter taste.

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It's best to use ornamental kale as a flower in your containers or landscape. Ornamental kale has been bred for leaves that feature purple, rose, pink and creamy white flowers that make them look more like large flowers than vegetables. There are several types of leaves – deeply cut, curly, frilled and ruffled.

So, what am I going to do with my ornamental kale? I plan to enjoy the yellow flowers on the one plant and keep both plants in indirect light on the patio. I will experiment with removing the seed heads and monitor plant survival till fall. At any rate, I've had fun learning what NOT to do!

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