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Growing Caladiums at Home

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Caladium Types and Varieties

Caladiums are tropical foliage plants originally discovered in Peru and the Amazon basin in Brazil. There are several species, but by far the most cultivated is *Caladium X hortulanum*, of which there are hundreds of varieties. They are highly valued for their beautiful and exquisitely colored leaves, which are produced freely under proper growing conditions.

Two different types of caladiums are available — fancy and lance leaved types (Figure 1). The most popular and familiar is the fancy leaved caladium. Large, somewhat rounded leaves are characteristic of this type. The distinguishing characteristics of the lance leaved is a narrow, elongated leaf; length of the leaves is similar to the fancy leaved type but the plants are usually more dwarf in stature. Lance leaved caladiums have thicker leaves than the fancy leaved type and are not as subject to injury from direct sun (sunburn).

Varied Uses of Caladiums

Caladiums are widely grown as pot plants and are available from florists and garden centers during spring and summer. These colorful plants make ideal gifts at Easter, Mother's Day and during the summer. They are practical gifts because they can be transplanted to outdoor areas.

Caladiums can be used for bedding purposes similar to the way petunias and marigolds are used. When mass planted in outside beds, they provide an extremely colorful effect (Figure 2).

Because they provide striking contrast with evergreen plants, caladiums are ideally suited for foregrounds of border and foundation plantings. White or pastel varieties show up best if the plants are seen from a distance. Dark, rich colors tend to blend with background plantings and are more effective along walks or other areas seen at close range.

Identical varieties are often grouped in a confined location to create a focal point. Several plants of the same variety can also be used to highlight a garden statue, small fountain or other landscape feature (Figure 3).

Caladiums are effectively used in various containers that flank shaded entrance ways or garden pools. Certain compact varieties are even suited for hanging baskets (Figure 4).

Potted caladiums are also being used in interior landscapes. They find wide acceptance in mall plantings or planters in commercial and professional buildings. In such locations they require strong, indirect light, warm temperatures and proper watering if they are to remain attractive for considerable periods of time.

Starting Tubers

Caladiums are grown from tubers, which are botanically defined as fleshy, underground stems bearing true buds. Tubers are commercially available in four different grades or sizes, which include: Mammoth – 3½ inches or larger in diameter; Jumbo – 2½ to 3½ inches; No. 1 – 1½ to 2½ inches; and No. 2 – 1 to 1½ inches (Figure 5). Purchase only hard, firm tubers — soft tubers are an indication of disease or improper storage.

Tubers must be planted in warm soils if they are to sprout and grow well. A soil temperature of at least 70 degrees is preferred for sprouting. Temperatures between 70 and 80 degrees are considered more ideal for forcing tubers into growth. Planting too early in cool soils often causes poor growth or rotting of the tubers. For best results, delay outdoor planting until May 15 in south Georgia and June 1 in the Piedmont area of the state.

Tubers are often forced into growth indoors before soils are warm enough for planting outside. Forcing makes it possible to have caladiums in leaf three to four weeks sooner than if they were planted outdoors.

When tubers begin to sprout, the normal tendency is for the center bud or “eye” to grow first and produce only a few large leaves. Smaller size buds on the tuber begin growing much later. Several methods can be used to force buds or eyes into early growth.

Tubers can be planted upside-down or they can be quartered and planted back-to-back.

A third and more practical approach is to remove the center bud prior to planting. If the bud is somewhat elongated, remove it as indicated in Figure 7. If the bud is not excessively elongated, carefully remove it with a small knife (Figure 8). Using a knife helps prevent damage to small hidden buds capable of developing leaves. Figure 9 shows the difference in a scooped versus non-scooped tuber.

Light Requirements

For best results, plant caladiums in a semi-shaded location. From 40 to 60 percent shade is considered ideal. Leaf colors develop best in this amount of light. This recommendation is especially applicable for fancy leaved varieties, since they have large leaves and lose large amounts of moisture to the air. The fancy leaved varieties can be used in areas exposed to full sun for 1 to 2 hours per day, preferably in the cooler morning hours. Longer exposure destroys the pigment in the leaves and limits growth. Overexposure to full sun may cause foliage bleaching or even burning of the thinner-leaved varieties.

Certain varieties of the lance or strap leaved caladiums can be planted in full sun provided they are started in this exposure from tubers or transplanted there early in the season as young plants. Adequate moisture is essential under these conditions.

Soil Preference

Soils for caladiums should be porous and contain organic matter. These conditions ensure aeration, drainage and sufficient water-holding capacity for proper growth. To obtain these soil conditions, it is generally necessary to amend either clay or sandy soils with organic matter. A ratio of two parts soil to one part organic matter is ideal. Sources of organic matter include coarse peat moss, pine bark, well-rotted manure or well-rotted leaf mold.

Fertilization Program

Caladiums respond to proper fertilization. A complete fertilizer should be mixed with the soil and organic matter at planting time. A minimum of 2 pounds of a garden fertilizer per 100 square feet (2 tsp./sq. ft.) is suggested.

Therefore, apply 1 pound of an 8-8-8 or 10-10-10 fertilizer per 100 square feet (1 tsp./sq. ft.) each month during the growing season. Apply the fertilizer evenly, keeping it off the foliage and water thoroughly to prevent fertilizer injury.

Water Requirements

Caladiums lose a considerable amount of moisture to the atmosphere through their large and numerous leaves. For this reason, they have a rather high water requirement. They do well when soils are kept moist but not water-logged. Mulching plants and maintaining a high relative humidity are beneficial in maintaining healthy, turgid foliage. If soils are allowed to dry, wilting occurs rapidly. Foliage loss is likely if plants remain wilted for any considerable length of time. For this reason, it is advisable to check often caladiums planted in beds, planters or containers and be sure soils do not approach a dry condition. To avoid injury, do not plant caladiums where they are subject to heavy runoff or splashing.

Storing Tubers

Caladium tubers produce colorful foliage each year, provided they are dug at the right time in the fall and protected from low temperatures until the next planting season.

Lift plants from ground beds or remove them from patio pots before frost. Lift plants in north Georgia by the second week in October. In south Georgia, lift plants by the second week in November.

After shaking the soil from the tubers, spread the plants in a warm, sunny location to dry (Figure 10). Let them dry for 7-10 days, then pull the dried leaves away from the tuber, and remove remaining soil particles with a soft brush. If low temperatures occur while tubers are drying, move them indoors to prevent injury.

Insects and Diseases

Caladiums are generally trouble free. The few diseases that affect caladiums — generally tuber rots — can usually be controlled through proper cultural and storage methods. Nematodes may occasionally damage caladiums. For this reason, and in the interest of disease control, do not replant caladiums in the same area year after year.

Insects are seldom a problem, though occasionally aphids, thrips or caterpillars may do some damage. For identification and control recommendations on insects and diseases, contact your local county extension office.

Table 1. Common Caladium Cultivars, Characteristics and Appropriate Colors

Cultivar	Primary Foliage Colors	Uses and Requirements ¹			
		6-inch pots	4-inch pots	Hanging baskets	Bedding plants
Fancy leaf types					
Aaron	white/green	D			SHD
Blaze	red	D	D		SHD
Candidum	white/green	D			SHD
Candidum Junior	white/green	N	O		SHD, SUN
Carolyn Whorton	pink/white/green	D			SHD, SUN
Dr. Groover	pink	O	D		SHD
Fannie Munson	pink	D			SHD
Festivia	pink/green	O	D		SHD
Fire Chief	rose/red	O	D		SHD
Florida Cardinal	red/green	D			SHD
Florida Roselight	pink/green	D			SHD
Florida Sunrise	white/green/red	D			SHD
Frieda Hemple	red/green	O	D	HB	SHD
Gingerland	green/red	N	O		SHD
Irene Dark	red	D			
Itcapus	rose/red	O	D		SHD
John Peed	red	D			SHD
Jubilee	white/rose				SHD
June Bride	white/green	D			SHD
Kathleen	pink	O	D		
Lord Derby	pink/green	O	D		
Miss Chicago	rose/red	D			
Mrs. Arno Nehrling	white/pink/red	O	D		
Mrs. F.M. Joyer	rose/red	O	D		SHD
Pink Beauty	pink/red	D			SHD
Pink Cloud	pink/green	D			SHD
Postman Joyner	red/green	D			SHD
Red Flash	red	D			SHD
Rosebud	pink	O	D		SHD, SUN
Scarlet Pimpernell	red/green	D	D		SHD
Tom Tomlinson	dark red	O	D		SHD
White Christmas	white/green	D			SHD
White Queen	white/red	D			SHD, SUN
Lance Leaf Types					
Caloosahatchee	rose	O	D		
Clarice	pink	D			SHD
Jackie Suthers	white	D		HB	SHD, SUN

Lance Whorton	pink/red	O	D		SHD, SUN
Miss Muffet	green/red	N	O	HB	SHD, SUN
Cultivar	Primary Foliage Colors	Uses and Requirements ¹			
		6-inch pots	4-inch pots	Hanging baskets	Bedding plants
Mumbo	pink	O	D	HB	SHD, SUN
Pink Gem	pink/white	N	D	HB	SHD, SUN
Pink Symphony	pink/white	O	D	HB	
Red Frill	red	N	O	HB	SHD, SUN
Rosalie	red	N	O	HB	SHD
Sea Gull	white/green	O	D		SHD, SUN
Sunset	rose/white	N	N		SHD, SUN
Sweet Heart	pink	N	O	HB	SHD, SUN
Tropicana	rose/white	O	D		
White Wing	white/rose	O	D	HB	SHD

¹Where letters appear under a category, the specific cultivar is suitable for the indicated use. "N" indicates that de-eyeing is not necessary for the indicated use. "O" indicates that de-eyeing is optional, and "D" indicates that de-eyeing is required. "SHD" indicates that the cultivar should be grown only in the shade and "SUN" indicates that the cultivar performs best in the sun. Where both "SHD" and "SUN" appear, that cultivar performs well under both shade and sun. "HB" indicates that the cultivar performs well in hanging baskets.

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