

# HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

## CALADIUMS

Using colorful foliage plants is a great alternative to flowering plants for adding color to the landscape. Some of the most colorful, easy-to-care-for plants for a landscape are caladiums (*Caladium hortulanum*).

Caladiums have been popular in Florida gardens for many years because of their bright colorful foliage and magnificent form. They require little maintenance and add color all summer long to any landscape, whether they are used in flowerbeds or in containers.

Caladiums are available in red, pink, green, white and many combinations of these colors. There are two types of caladiums available for the Florida gardener - fancy-leaved and lance-leaved. Fancy leaves are more popular because of their large heart-shaped leaves. Lance-leaved caladiums have narrow, elongated leaves and a more compact form. This type is also hardier, with long-lasting color, making it great for flower arrangements. However, the fancy-leaved caladiums create a fuller form in the landscape.

Caladiums can be purchased as tubers, which are the underground food storage units for the plant, as seedlings, or as full-size plants. When purchasing tubers, look for ones that are firm. Soft tubers indicate that they have been damaged by cold temperatures and will not produce leaves. The size of the tubers is another element to consider. Leaf size of caladiums is determined by the size of the tuber. The larger the tubers, the larger the leaves.

Find a partly shaded area to plant the caladium tubers, like under a tree. Caladiums will perform best when planted in partial shade. Although they will grow in full sun, the color in the leaves will fade by the bright light. With filtered sun, caladiums will produce brilliant colored leaves. Before caladium tubers are placed in the ground, the sandy soil of Florida should be amended.

Caladiums grow best in soils with high organic matter, such as peat moss or compost. Tubers and full-size plants can be planted in the spring after the final frost. Plant tubers in the soil 2 inches deep and 18 inches apart. Make sure to place the growing points of the tubers facing upward. Pack the soil firmly around them to prevent air pockets from forming.

Caladiums need to be kept moist, in a well-drained soil. If overwatered in a poorly drained site they will decay. If underwatered, the plant will wilt rapidly, losing leaves if allowed to wilt for any period of time.

Fertilization is important. Caladiums that are grown in organically amended soil need one tablespoon of complete fertilizer (6-6-6) for each plant four weeks after planting and every two months thereafter. Caladiums in sandy soils need monthly applications of fertilizer during the growing season because sandy soils cannot retain nutrients for long periods.

After the growing season, the tubers can be removed from the ground and stored. This practice can lengthen their life span. When temperatures drop below 60°F and the caladium plants begin to decline, remove the tubers from the ground. Clean the tubers of soil particles and allow them to dry. Store the dried tubers in a container of sand or peat moss and place them in an area with a minimum temperature of 70°F and a maximum temperature of 90°F.

Within eight weeks of being held in storage, the tubers will begin to sprout. This is an indication that they are ready to be planted, however, they may be stored until you are ready to plant them in the spring. Continue this routine after every season and your caladiums will provide you with years of enjoyment.

Caladiums, which are relatively free of insect problems, can be great additions to any landscape or container. With minimum maintenance and time, these beautiful plants will consume and brighten many flowerbeds.

On August 25<sup>th</sup> - 27<sup>th</sup>, the 16th Annual Caladium Festival will be held in Lake Placid. What a great way to see all the many beautiful varieties of caladiums. Ninety eight percent of the world's caladiums are grown in Lake Placid making it the "Caladium Capital of the World". Caladium exhibit booths will show the many varieties of

commercially grown caladiums and provide information about these beautiful and versatile plants. Bus tours will be available to the caladium fields. For more information on this wonderful event, contact the Greater Lake Placid Florida Chamber of Commerce at (863) 465-4331.

Information for this article was taken from the University of Florida/IFAS publication "Caladiums for Florida". For a free copy of this publication and answers to other gardening questions, call the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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