



Plants for use in a Traditional African-American Yard in Miami-Dade County

Ornamentals: Flowering Perennials

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Westmacott's¹ survey of rural African American yards in three southern US states provides an extensive list of perennials grown for either their showy flowers or colorful foliage, only a few of which are successful in south Florida. Others can be grown here either as annuals (one season) or are not suited. The cut-off point for selecting plants was again a 25% frequency for use in any one state in the survey. Some plants that were used less frequently have been included because they are well adapted to south Florida conditions. Several bulbous and cormous plants were listed in the above survey, and the limited number that can be grown in south Florida, is also discussed. Few of the plants in this group can be relied upon in Miami-Dade to make a major contribution to that all important aspect of the traditional African American yard, vibrant garden color, the best adapted being cannas, day lilies and caladiums.

Cannas (*Canna x generalis*, Canna lilies). The common name is a misnomer since cannas are not related to lilies, but relatives of ginger and banana. *C.x generalis* is an extensive group of hybrid cannas developed for use as ornamental plants, with showy flowers in shades of yellow, orange, pink, scarlet/red to purple, some of which are bicolored. In addition foliage can vary with leaves that are gray-green to bright green through shades of brown to purple, some being variegated. Cannas vary in size from dwarfs, such as the Pfitzer series (to 2.5') to the giant King Humbert series (to 6'). Most of these cultivated cannas are derived in part from *Canna indica*, sometimes referred to as the wild canna or Indian shot. The latter name is due to the appearance of the seed, which resembles lead shot. None of the cannas are native to India. All are originally from the New World tropics and sub-tropics, though they have now naturalized in many areas of the world. One species, *Canna flaccida* (golden canna), is native to S.E. United States, and grows to 3-6' in south Florida. The flowers although attractive, are short lived and the plant spreads rapidly given sufficiently moist soil. It cannot be recommended for garden cultivation.

Cannas are relatively easy to grow, requiring for best results at least 6-8" of moist but free-draining topsoil, enriched with organic matter, in a site receiving full sun to slight shade. New plants are usually started in late winter to early spring in South Florida by setting out lengths of rhizome (fleshy underground stem), 2-3" deep and 1-2' apart. Ensure that the soil remains moist and apply a slow release fertilizer, such as a palm special, every 2-3 months. Remove spent flowers to ensure renewed flowering, thin out old weak stems and dig out any dead clumps. Cannas can also be grown in 4-5 gallon containers using fresh potting soil.

In south Florida's climate it is possible to leave cannas in the ground year round, however it is beneficial to cut them back as winter approaches and dig out the rhizomes. The planting bed can then be cultivated (weeds removed and additional organic matter worked into the bed), dead plants eliminated and clumps split in order to propagate new plants.

¹ See the section on '[Resources and links](#)'

The most troublesome pests of cannas are caterpillars, particularly leaf rollers, and snails. Apart from occasional problems with bacterial leaf spot, diseases aren't usually significant where plants are grown with adequate drainage and exposure to sun. Rust can sometimes affect foliage during periods of dry, cool (below 80°F) weather.

Chrysanthemums Although an important horticultural crop in Florida, the use of chrysanthemums (garden mums - *Dendranthema x grandiflorum*) in south Florida as a garden perennial is limited due to the hot wet summers. Transplants of late flowering perennial varieties can be planted in the fall choosing a site in full sun with excellent drainage. Pinch out new growth to develop a more bushy plant and remove spent flowers to induce further flowering. Best treated as an annual in south Florida.

Day Lilies (*Hemerocallis* spp. native to China and surrounding areas). Although part of the family Liliaceae, day lilies differ from true lilies (*Lilium*) in possessing fleshy roots rather than a bulb. As the name suggests each bloom last only a day, however a single stem can produce many flowers, and a given plant remain in bloom for 3-4 weeks. By carefully choosing the varieties grown it is possible to extend the period day lilies can contribute color to the garden. Despite more than 40,000 day lily cultivars having been registered with the American Hemerocallis Society, this is an under used plant in south Florida landscapes. Part of the reason for this could be due to many of the more widely available varieties, such as 'Stella D'Oro', not being suitable for this area.

For South Florida evergreen day lilies (not dormant during winter) as well as a few semi-evergreen varieties grow well. Recently cultivars specifically developed for Florida conditions have become available in local wholesale/retail outlets. These have the added advantage of being moderately priced – day lilies tend to be relatively expensive a fact that probably deterred more extensive use in local landscapes. Even though they can be initially expensive, once established, day lilies can be dug up and divided to produce new material for the landscape. Like cannas these are ideal plants to pass on to friends and relatives, extending a custom that was common amongst rural African American gardeners.

In the landscape choose a site in full sun or slight shade, those varieties with the darker colored flowers being more suited to some shade. The tetraploid varieties with darker colored flowers are most tolerant of shade, though a minimum of 4-6 hours sun is necessary for all daylilies. Those varieties producing flowers of the darkest red or purple are best situated where they will receive some afternoon shade during a south Florida summer.

Daylily divisions that have been stored, or purchased through the mail, benefit from a 12-24 hour soak prior to planting. Although not too particular as to soil, it is advisable to work in some organic material, after which plants should be placed about 18" apart. Dig a shallow hole large enough to accommodate the roots with a mound of soil in the middle. Position the center of the plant on top of the mound with the fleshy roots spread out around the sides, then cover with soil. Daylilies should be planted no deeper than they were prior to dividing. Do not cover the area where the stems and roots meet (the crown) with more than 1"

of soil otherwise they are prone to disease. If planted too deep they will not flower. Apply a slow release fertilizer 2-3x a year and once they are established water only during periods of drought.

After 2-3 years a clump of daylilies can be lifted once flowering ceases, then divided using a sharp knife, to provide new material for planting. In some instances little plantlets (proliferations) develop on flower stems. These can be used to grow new plants by cutting the stem below the point where the plantlet has formed and placing it in moist soil. Daylilies produce seedpods, however these are not routinely used to propagate plants except by those breeding new varieties.

There are few pests of concern to those growing daylilies, thrips, spider mites and eastern lubber grasshoppers being occasional problems. The one serious disease, day lily rust, difficult to control and is best prevented by avoiding infected plants. Disease problems in general are more likely where there is poor air circulation and/or waterlogged soil.

Elephant's Ear (*Alocasia* spp.) Plants referred to by the common name "Elephant Ears" are in the genus *Alocasia*, rather than as stated in Westmacott's list, the closely related *Colocasia*. Both are bold foliage plants well suited to partially shaded areas of the yard and can be important elements where the intent is to accentuate a sense of the tropics. The *Colocasia* are a group of aroids grown for their starchy roots (i.e. taro and dasheen – see "Vegetables of Importance in Africa" in the Vegetable and Fruit Crops Section. One cultivar of *Colocasia esculenta*, 'Black Magic', is a much sought after ornamental because of the striking almost black leaves ('Jet Black Wonder' is a more recent similar introduction). *Colocasias* will take moister soil than *alocasias* and can be used at the edge of an ornamental pool – in containers they can be submerged in 6 – 12" of water.

Alocasia spp. are less significant as food crops (giant taro, *Alocasia macrorrhiza* is a minor food source), but are widely grown as foliage plants. These are large, usually rhizomatous plants, with striking, over sized, arrow to heart shaped leaves. The prominently veined foliage occurs in various shades of green, often variegated, with some varieties having a purple or bronze cast.

Alocasia macrorrhiza is sometimes found as a landscape plant in south Florida, but more colorful cultivars are available such as 'Violaceae' (purple foliage), 'Variegata' (leaves variously blotched cream, dark green or grey green) and 'New Guinea Gold' (gold stems and golden yellow leaf venation). Similar to 'New Guinea Gold' but of more recent introduction is the cv. 'Seven Colors' with the stems of mature specimens colored red, purple, pink and peach. More widely grown is the smaller *A. sanderiana*, with arrow shaped wavy margined leaves (varieties: 'Gandavensis' purple to green foliage with orangey red venation, and the dwarf 'Van Houtte' with off white venation). The popular *A. x amazonica* is a cross between *A. lowii* and *A. sanderiana* with larger less wavy leaves having a purplish underside and silvery veins. Another attractive cross is 'Green Velvet' (*A. amazonica* x *A. micholitziana*) with velvety bright green leaves and white veins.

There are many small alocasias with boldly patterned foliage that are especially suitable for a large containers/planters. They are also useful planted in groups, and are especially effective against a background green foliated shade loving plants such as ferns and spathiphyllums. *Alocasia* 'Green Shield' at 3' has vivid lime green leaves and much darker almost black venation. Known erroneously as the giant caladium *A. cuprae* also grows to 3', the intensely dark green venation contrasting with the coppery iridescence of the rest of the leaf blade. Several cultivars have very dark almost black foliage with lighter colored leaf veins including the 12" *A. reginula* 'Black Velvet' and *A. plumbea* 'Nigra'. There are many other cultivars from which to choose.

Elephant ears are usual propagated from divisions of the fleshy underground rhizomes, which are set out in a partly shaded site having soil enriched with plenty of organic matter. As a group they are neither drought nor salt-tolerant and require irrigation in the absence of regular rainfall, with routine applications of fertilizer to maintain their appearance.

Caladium (*Caladium bicolor*) This close relative of Alocasia (see above), native to tropical S. America, has yielded many very attractive cultivars grown for their strikingly colorful foliage, patterned in shades of green with pink, red or white. Caladium cultivars can be divided into two groups according to leaf shape: fancy-leaved (heart shaped leaves similar in form to Alocasia but much smaller) and lance-leaved (narrower, smaller leaves on a more compact plant). The fancy-leaved cultivars are more often used as landscape plants in South Florida, whereas the lance-leaved caladiums are more popular as container plants.

Most caladiums grow best with dappled shade, or at least some shade during the hottest part of the day. In full sun plants are more liable to wilt unless regularly watered, and develop less intense foliage color. There are some varieties that perform well in full sun including 'Seagull' (white), 'Rosebud' (pink) and 'Red Frill' (red). Caladiums require at least 6-8" of moisture retentive, light, organically enriched soil. Tubers are spaced about 1' apart at a depth of 1-2", and can be planted during the spring providing care is taken to prevent the soil from drying. A slow release 10/10/10 can be incorporated into the soil at the time of planting. Later in the season as air temperatures fall below 65°F foliage color will deteriorate, though the plants will usually continue to grow in Miami-Dade through the winter. Tubers are prone to rot at this time if there is unusually cool wet weather, and can be lifted for storage and re-planted the following spring.

Miscellaneous The remaining most frequently used perennials from Westmacott's list are of limited use in South Florida, though **yucca** (*Yucca filimentosa*) and **prickly pear** cactus (*Opuntia* spp.) can be successfully grown. The more tropical *Yucca elephantipes* (spineless yucca) may be preferable since it does not have any sharp spines. Prickly pear is prone to scales and caterpillars, and can under some circumstances become invasive.

Verbena is best used as an annual, though varieties such as 'Sissinghurst' may last 2-3 years in a well- drained, full sun site. Locally, both powdery mildew and whitefly can be serious problems on verbena if not controlled. Although **Hollyhocks** (*Alcea rosea*, syn. *Althea rosea*) could be grown as an annual

(planted in October) in South Florida, they require nematode free soil and are prone to a variety of fungal and bacterial leaf spots which renders them a poor choice for this area.

Bulbs and corms The two most popular plants in this group based on Westmacott's survey were tiger lilies (*Lilium tigrinum*) and crinums. Tiger lilies are not adapted to grow in South Florida, however **crinums** are quite commonly grown. There are a number of species and cultivars available, though Westmacott lists one called milk and honey. Possibly this is a reference to *Crinum zeylanicum*, often referred to as milk and wine lily. This crinum is native to east Africa and tropical Asia and has a flat-topped cluster of up to 13 white flowers, with a diffuse reddish stripe in the middle of each tepal, borne on a thick leafless stalk. There is also a crinum native to the south-east U.S., *Crinum americanum* (swamp lily) that is found in wet situations where it spreads to give solid cover by means of a stoloniferous bulb. *C. americanum* can under suitable conditions spread well beyond its allotted space in the yard.

Crinums should be planted in full sun with some light afternoon shade during the hottest part of the day. Provide an organically enriched soil with moderately good drainage and plant each bulb 4-5" deep (the top of the neck even with the soil), about 3' apart. Although crinums can be planted throughout the year, fall to early spring are preferred. Once established crinums are moderately drought tolerant, however they benefit from an evenly moist soil. There are leaf spotting diseases and stem and bulb rots that are occasional problems, aggravated by excess moisture. Eastern lubber grasshoppers are attracted to the foliage and can cause chewing damage during late winter into spring

Gladioli These erect colorful plants are extremely popular as long lasting cut flowers, with the added attraction of being available in a wide range of colors. Many thousands of cultivars have been developed, most derived from a limited number of species from southern Africa. Individual flowers are tubular to funnel shaped, arranged alternatively as a tall spike, with all the flowers on one side of the spike facing the same direction. Colors range from white to yellow through shades of pink, red, violet – most colors except a true blue. There are multi-colored flowers, those with speckling and some with a smoky hue. Flowers at the bottom of a spike open first, with a whole spike flowering over a period of about a week.

Gladiolus corms can be planted any time of the year in a mild winter climate, and will flower about 80 days later. However in South Florida it is best to avoid exposure to the wettest months of the year (June –September). Corms should be lifted after flowering but before foliage completely dies down (about 6 weeks), dried and stored in cool dry place separating new corms from the parent corm. When planting, choose corms that have a definite crown (not flattened), with a ring of root buds visible around the base. Set out 4-6" apart at a depth of about 3", slightly deeper in a sandy soil, choosing an area that receives full sun. For landscaping purposes gladioli are best grown in clumps rather than formal rows, and can be set out with other annual bedding plants, inserting several stakes in the ground for support. Soil should be light but organically enriched, and kept moist but never wet once growth commences. Bulbs can be dusted with an

appropriate fungicide before planting. In order to lessen the risk from soil borne diseases/pests it is advisable not to grow gladioli in the same part of the garden for more than two or three years.

For more permanent landscape plants proceed to the section on [trees, shrubs and vines](#)