

## A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING

### Accent plants: an essential part of a tropical garden

Nobody in Miami-Dade could have failed to notice the sudden breathtaking show of color, now almost at an end, as the yellow tabebuias burst into bloom. An impressive display, but over in 4-5 weeks. Now we can now look forward to the royal poincianas, and pink shower trees in late spring early summer, the golden shower trees and queen crepe myrtle somewhat later, and into fall *Lonchocarpus* (Florida lilac), *Chorisia* (floss silk tree) and various sennas (cassias). With late fall/winter, it is the turn of yesterday, today and tomorrow (*Brunsfelsia grandiflora*) and the dombeyas (tropical hydrangeas) and from mid winter well into late spring the shrub pentas (*Rondeletia leucophylla*). You can probably make a similar list of your own favorite flowering shrubs and trees. The point is that apart from their individual flower displays, these plants make another important contribution to the landscape. Taken together they give us a sense of time. In Miami-Dade landscapes, seasonal variances are slight compared to more temperate climates. The waxing and waning of each flower display is a living pictorial guide to our changing seasons.

Contrast this with accent plants, which make a more permanent year round statement. Their permanency acts to frame or highlight particular aspects of the landscape. Although trees and shrubs can serve as accents, in a subtropical climate such as ours plants with bold foliage and little seasonal change are preferred. In Miami-Dade they often serve to accentuate the underlying tropical character of the landscape. This is especially so around a swimming pool, decorative pond or an atrium.

They can also act as living sign posts guiding our eye to specific elements within the overall landscape design. For this purpose avoid plants that overpower the surrounding landscape. For instance a variegated shell ginger in a half shady corner of the yard can first focus our attention on a certain section of the landscape. We then notice that there are other plants of interest, maybe some delicate ferns or shade tolerant bedding plants. Accent plants with oversized and/or vividly colored leaves do have a place. They can act like exclamation marks, adding some excitement to an otherwise dull part of the landscape. Plants with especially vivid leaves such graptophyllums, cordylines or codiaeums are well suited for this purpose. Accent plants are useful in very small yard as a source of year round color where space does not permit room for several flowering shrubs. As framing plants, those with strong architectural features such as yuccas and large agaves are well suited. Remember, the designation accent plant is not set in concrete – it is more how the plant is used.

For the purpose of this article we will concentrate on plants that nudge Miami from the sub-tropical to the truly tropical. While we may desire an area of lush tropical growth, we need to avoid an unkempt appearance by not over planting. We should aim for just a hint of the jungle, carefully selecting the foliage plants to be used and where they are placed. Most have moderate to low light requirements, and require moist soil. If you already have plenty of shade, foliage plants are an excellent choice for what is often a problem area. If shade is lacking there are foliage plants, such as travelers palm, ornamental bananas, some dracenas and heliconias that can take full sun.

Space does not permit a review of all the many accent plants available for Miami-Dade

yards. The remainder of this article will therefore concentrate on a single family of tropical foliage plants familiar to most, the **Araceae**. First we will consider a broad group of plants popularly known as elephant ears. Alocasias and colocasias are rhizomatous or tuberous rooted plants grown for their large, more or less arrow shaped prominently veined leaves. The leaf stem is usually attached within the body of the leaf blade (peltate), rather the leaf margin. The leaves can vary in color and patterning, with various shades of green, yellow or purple. The sap from many of these plants can cause skin irritation as well as internal poisoning if ingested.

All alocasias require a moist, organically enriched, but free draining soil. They exhibit limited drought tolerance, and should be mulched to help prevent the soil from drying out. Though some can be grown in full sun, partial shade is preferable especially during periods of hot dry weather (late spring and summer). Salt tolerance is poor, so avoid planting close to the ocean. Usually available as container plants, rhizomes of the more difficult to find specimens are available by mail order. To help prevent rhizomes from rotting they should be first planted in containers, covered with 2-3" of light airy potting mix kept just moist until shoots appear. Do not over water as the rhizomes will rot. Alocasias are heavy feeders, and should receive monthly applications of liquid fertilizer if in containers, or a slow release fertilizer every three months if planted in the ground. Propagation is by division of rhizomes, removal of offsets or rooting stem cuttings.

The **giant taro** (*Alocasia macrorrhiza*), which is grown as a food crop for the edible rhizome (must be cooked), makes an imposing plant growing to more than 12' with each leaf blade to 4'. Cultivars with colorful/variegated leaves are especially imposing: '**Violaceae**' has purple foliage, '**Variegata**' leaves are variably blotched with cream, dark green or grey green and '**New Guinea Gold**' has bright golden stems and prominent golden yellow leaf veins. Similar to 'New Guinea Gold' but of recent introduction is the cultivar '**Seven Colors**' with the stems of larger specimens colored red, purple, peach and pink. Requiring plenty of humidity and shade, *Alocasia portodora* is an imposing specimen growing up to 6' with large ruffled leaves, an excellent choice beside an ornamental pool. *Alocasia plumbea* '**Metallica**' grows to at least 8' with 3-4' wide quilted leaves the upper surface having a green metallic sheen, the lower surface wine colored. Somewhat smaller, growing to 5-6' is *Alocasia sanderiana* (**Kris plant**) which has arrow shaped saggitate leaves with silvery distinctly wavy margins. The upper surface of the leaf is a dark metallic green with silvery veins, while the lower surface is more purplish. A cross between *A. sanderiana* and *Alocasia lowii* produced the popular hybrid *A. x Amazonica* which has larger leaves with less wavy margins. The mid rib is white to lime green with silvery white venation and the under surface of the leaves a darker purple

There are many smaller alocasias with boldly patterned foliage that can be used singly or in groups as focal points to contrast with the overall green foliage of neighboring plants such as ferns or spathiphyllums. *Alocasia* '**Green Shield**' is fast growing to 3'; the leaves are a vivid lime green with much darker, almost black venation. Sometimes known (erroneously) as the giant caladium, *Alocasia cuprae* grows to 3', the leaves possessing a deep coppery iridescence, the midrib and veins dark green appearing almost black. More diminutive, but only in size, is *Alocasia reginula* '**Black Velvet**', growing to about 12", with deep green to almost black rounded leaves with pale whitish green veins and a deep purple underside. This is another specimen requiring adequate shade

and humidity. Also with very dark foliage is *Alocasia plumbea* 'Nigra' – leaves shiny, very deep purple with a silvery purple underside. *Alocasia guttata* var. 'Imperealis' has thick, oblong to lanceolate 12" leaves that are saggitate (lobed at the base), pale bluish green with darker green venation. Somewhat similar, but with leaves more distinctly lobed, and with wavier margins is *A. sanderiana* 'Nobilis'. There are many more alocasias available with foliage differing in form and patterning.

**Colocasias** are closely related to alocasias, separated solely on the basis of certain aspects of flower structure. Incidentally the inflorescence, as for all aroids, takes the form of a spadix but in contrast to Anthuriums and Spathiphyllums, it either rarely forms or is of little ornamental value. Colocasias are more familiar as edible plants (taro, *Colocasia esculenta*) compared to alocasias, their use as ornamentals a comparatively recent development. They will take somewhat moister soil than alocasias, and are excellent planted at the edge of an ornamental pool. Colocasias can even be grown in up to 6 -12" water by immersing the plant while still in its container. Provide some shade, especially from hot afternoon sun, and regular applications of fertilizer.

*Colocasia gigantea* is rare in cultivation, but worth seeking out - huge 5' x 4' grayish green leaves with wavy margins on a 6' stem produces an imposing plant. This is larger than the more common *C. esculenta* (edible taro), which makes a useful plant for an ornamental pool, and can take full sun if the soil remains moist. A sensation when it first appeared, *C. esculenta* 'Black Magic' has 2' long dark purple to black leaves. Growing into a 4-6' wide/high clump, it makes a particularly stunning impact when used with lighter colored green or variegated foliage plants. A more recently introduced cultivar, 'Black Runner' grows to 6' with claims of even more intense black foliage, and spreads by runners.

A final elephant ear look-a-like, *Xanthosoma maffafa* is most familiar locally as the edible root crop malanga. It is also used as a foliage plant, growing to about 6', the 2 -4' leaves more arrow-shaped than colocasias. There are a few ornamental cultivars available, such as the popular 'Lime Zinger', producing a 4' clump of lime green leaves; an ideal derful choice to contrast with the dark foliage of *C. esculenta* 'Black Magic'. Growing conditions for *Xanthosoma* are as above, with best foliage color where there is at least half day shade from direct sun.

Long used as conservatory plants, **dieffenbachias** can make excellent landscaping subjects given humidity, partial shade and a site sheltered from wind. Soil should be enriched, moist but free draining. Reduce irrigation during cool temperatures of winter allowing the top of the soil to dry out before watering, with occasional misting to maintain humidity. The edges of the leaves will turn brown if conditions are too dry while excessively wet soil will result in small downwardly curved leaves. It is especially important to protect plants from cold drying winds in winter. Apply a high nitrogen slow release fertilizer every 2-3 months during the growing season. Commonly known as dumbcane all parts of the plant are poisonous, contact with mouth or throat causing pronounced swelling. Exercise caution where children or pets have unsupervised access - this also applies to their indoor use.

Compared to alocasias, dieffenbachias have more rounded, paddle shaped leaves. Alternatively arranged leaves marbled or variegated in green, yellow or white are found at the apex of stout cane-like stems growing up to 6', though some cultivars are almost stemless. The lower part of the stem is leafless bearing old leaf scars,. There are very

many cultivars and hybrids from which to choose, the ancestry of many is unknown but probably involves *Dieffenbachia seguine*. The so-called *D. amoena* 'Tropic Snow' is more correctly *D. seguine* 'Tropic Snow', since "D. amoena" is itself regarded as a garden cultivar of *D. seguine*. Irrespective of nomenclature, 'Tropic Snow' is justly popular, growing to about 4' with a short stem bearing mid green leaves with darker green markings and a feathering of creamy white down the center of the blade. The leaves of *Dieffenbachia* 'Tropic Marianne' Pat # 8832 are greenish yellow edged dark green; 'Camille' cream to white with the margins and mid-rib dark green; 'Rudolph Roehrs' creamy yellow with white blotches and dark green veins and margins; 'Camille' produces a full bushy plant with creamy yellow leaves with a dark green border. 'Exotica' exhibits grayish green leaves, extensively variegated creamy white down the center of the blade and between the lateral veins.

Whereas the above aroids do better with at least some shade, two popular **philodendrons**, *Philodendron bipinnatifidum* (commonly known as **selloum**) and *P.'Xanadu'* can thrive in either direct sun or shade (bright light). Selloum is admired for the large glossy green, highly dissected 3' leaves. These are held on long petioles from a tree like stem that can eventually grow to 12 -15'. As the plant matures the stem becomes somewhat decumbent and the plant sprawls to become almost as wide as it is high. These make good foundation plants or can be very effective as tropical accent plants around a swimming pool, providing there is sufficient room for growth. They are best grown in moist soil, particularly in full sun situations where mulching is especially beneficial. Container plants grown in the shade should be gradually acclimatized if they are to be planted in full sun.

Where space is a consideration use the smaller *P. 'Xanadu'*, similar in appearance to selloum, it has grayish green highly dissected 18" leaves, the plant growing to 3-4'. Although able to survive moderate drought, it appears best grown in moist soil (mulched) and with regular applications of fertilizer. Effective as a tropical accent, either planted around the outer perimeter of a swimming pool, or poolside in large planters. As with other aroids the leaves are poisonous, and the sap can cause severe skin irritation in sensitive individuals.

As temperatures fall below 45°F aroids will become dormant, and can suffer noticeable damage as temperatures drop further, the extent of damage depending on the length of exposure. In interior parts of the county where occasional frosts are more likely, it is worth considering growing aroids that are especially intolerant of cold such as *aglaonemas* (especially 'Silver Queen') and some *dieffenbachias*, in movable containers.

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April 26, 2005