

Caladiums –Not Just for Shade



Photo by Marie Harrison: Caladiums add color, contrast, and texture to shaded areas in the landscape.

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Well, I certainly have my caladiums for the year. I was able to get all I wanted directly from a grower in Lake Placid , Florida , so I ordered a couple of boxes of them. Now comes the pleasant task of deciding where I want them in the landscape and prevailing upon Amiable Spouse to prepare me some new planting beds. I'll pot up some for my neighbors and give some to friends. Being able to share is, after all, one of the most pleasant parts of having and growing plants.

Caladiums are popular landscaping plants, and for good reason. Their foliage is spectacular. Heart-shaped leaves may vary from 6 inches to 2 feet in length, and colors vary from green and white, green and red, white with red blotches or green veins, green and pink, and all colors in between.

With so many combinations of colors and leaf sizes, many uses can be found in the landscape for these plants. Mass plantings create a spot of color and a striking contrast with the green foliage of other plants. They are well-suited for growing in containers which may be placed under trees and in other shady places.

Two main types of caladiums are available: fancy-leafed and lance or strap-leafed. Fancy-leafed types have large, heart-shaped leaves and may reach a height of 12 to 30 inches, depending on variety and growing conditions. The lance or strap-leafed types have narrow, elongated leaves and are great in hanging baskets or in patio containers.

Warm, moist soil is necessary for growing caladiums. Planting too early when the soil is still cool results in slow growth and tuber rot. Soil temperature should be at least 70 degrees F.

Gardeners can select from plants already growing in containers and plant them for an instant impact in the landscape. Alternatively, tubers are available at most garden centers, and buying them is usually cheaper than buying plants. When shopping for tubers, remember that large tubers have more leaf buds than small tubers,

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and so they make larger and better displays.

Each caladium tuber has a large central bud surrounded by several small buds. If the central bud is removed, many more shoots and leaves will be produced. If the central bud is left in place, most varieties produce only a few leaves.

Plant the bulbs three to five inches deep in loose soil to which organic matter has been added. For a thick, groundcover effect, plant them about 8 to 12 inches apart. Fertilize regularly with soluble fertilizer to promote strong foliage growth. Plants should be watered frequently and thoroughly, and soil should be kept evenly moist to the touch. Performance will be poor in dry soil.

Normally considered shade plants, some caladiums are now touted as being sun tolerant. Of course, rich, damp soil is necessary in sunny locations, and even then, only certain varieties can tolerate full sun well.

Caladiums can be dug in the fall and stored each year. Withhold water when leaves start to yellow in the fall. Then dig the tubers and let them dry in semi-shade for about ten days. Instructions say to treat them with an insecticide-fungicide before storing in dry peat moss or vermiculite. I have never treated my bulbs, and (knock on wood), I have never lost tubers to insects or diseases. I simply store them in trays in my unheated garage.

Some people choose to treat caladiums as annuals and plant new ones each summer. That is o.k., too, because the plants do not return reliably if left in the ground. Even though I have had a few come up the second year, the show is never as good as it was the first summer.

Whether you choose to grow caladiums in the ground or in a few thoughtfully placed containers, do not neglect this group of plants for adding seasonal color to the landscape. Few blooms can hold a candle to the showy leaves of caladiums.

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