

Caladiums



Caladium is often grown as a summer annual for the colorful foliage.

elephant ears (but don't confuse them with other plants, such as *Alocasia*, *Colocasia* and *Xanthosoma*, that also go by the common name elephant ears).

This is an "old-fashioned" plant, having been in cultivation in Europe since the late 1700's, used for its dramatic foliage. The leaves generally



Leaves have long petioles arising directly from the bulb.

have prominently colored midribs, contrasting margins, and patterns including mottled, veined and striped, in various combinations and shades of green, white, pink, rose and/or red. There are no stems; the leaves are borne on long petioles which arise directly from the underground tuber. The two main types of caladiums are the fancy-leaved types, which have large, heart-shaped or semi-heart-shaped leaves on long petioles (12 to 30 inches tall), while the strap- or lance-leaved types, with their shorter and narrower, ruffle-edged leaves on short petioles, are generally more compact (usually less than 12 inches tall). The lance-leaved types (derived from *C. picturatum*) have more leaves per tuber than fancy-leaved types.

Caladiums are tropical perennials with colorful, heart-shaped leaves native to tropical forests in South and Central America that have pronounced wet and dry seasons. *Caladium bicolor*, a Brazilian species, is the most common of several species in this genus in the arum family (Araceae) that are used as ornamentals. There are thousands of named cultivars of this species (sometimes listed as *C. x hortulanum*), but other species and hybrids are sometimes available. Although they are only hardy to zone 9 or 10, they are easily grown as summer

"bulbs" or as houseplants. Other common names besides

caladium include angels wings and



Caladiums are easily grown in containers.



There are many cultivars of caladium available.

Although they are grown as foliage plants, caladiums may bloom, producing a single (rarely 2-3) typical arum-type flower with a green or pinkish spathe surrounding a short white spadix. Fruits are white berries with several to many seeds. Most people remove the inflorescence since it takes away energy from the plant that otherwise would be used to produce more leaves or a bigger tuber.

Use caladiums to add color and texture in shade gardens and in containers for decks and patios. Grow them in naturalistic clusters of a single cultivar for greater



A caladium inflorescence emerging (L), open (C) and declining (R).



Combine caladiums with other shade-loving annuals in containers.

impact, or mix and match for a multi-colored effect in smaller areas. Try them in combination with ferns, astilbe, and shade-tolerant iris. Or intersperse them with other shade loving plants to provide fountains of color. Pair them with impatiens or fuchsias that have flowers in similar or contrasting colors. Select complementary coleus or begonia cultivars for a season-long foliage display of color and texture. Try a single, large plant in a raised pot or urn as a dramatic specimen plant and focal point in a flower bed. For a very tropical look, combine caladium with green or black elephant ears.

The more compact lance-leaved types are great for window boxes or smaller containers. The cut leaves can last several days in fresh flower arrangements.



Choose companion plants that will complement the colors of the caladium yet have a textural contrast.



Caladiums grow from a tuberous corm, commonly called a "bulb".



Intersperse caladiums in shade plantings to provide color.

Caladiums grow from a tuberous corm (often commonly referred to as a bulb). Tubers are available



A pot of 'Fantasy' caladium creates a dramatic statement in front of 'Rosy Lights' azalea.

in different sizes based on diameter. The larger the tuber, the more leaf buds, so bigger tubers will produce a larger foliage display. Each tuber has a large, central bud surrounded by several small buds (eyes). The central bud will produce the largest leaves, but also suppresses the smaller buds from growing. You can encourage the small buds to grow and produce more, but slightly smaller, leaves by removing the large, central bud by gouging it out with the tip of a sharp knife. Just be careful not to injure any of the surrounding small buds.



In the Midwest, start caladium tubers indoors in spring 4-6 weeks before the average last frost or purchase potted plants. Place the knobby side with the eyes up (both roots and shoots emerge from the top of the tuber) and barely cover with soil. Keep the container in a warm room (70F or warmer) with



Caladiums prefer a moist, rich, light, well-drained soil.

to maintain soil temperature below 85F. Traditional cultivars do best in partial shade. Although they will grow in full shade, vigor and color is not as good. There are many newer, sun-resistant varieties that can be grown in part to full sun, especially in cooler, northern areas. Provide adequate



Keep the soil evenly moist and provide plenty of fertilizer during the growing season.

A caladium started indoors. – either keep in the containers above ground or sunk into the ground, or transplant into the ground so the tuber is 1½”- 2” deep – after the last frost. They prefer a moist, rich, light, well-drained soil, so it is best to amend most soils with plenty of compost or other organic material. In areas with heavy soils it is often better to keep them in containers than to plant them in the ground. Tubers and plants will be damaged by low temperatures, and the plants will not grow much until temperatures are warm, so don’t rush to move them out right away. They do best when soil temperatures are at least 70F, and putting them in cold soil will just encourage the tubers to rot. But high soil temperatures will affect leaf color, so the plants should be mulched in warm climates below 85F. Traditional cultivars do best in partial shade. Although they will grow in full shade, vigor and color is not as good. There are many newer, sun-resistant varieties that can be grown in part to full sun, especially in cooler, northern areas. Provide adequate moisture during the growing season so the soil remains evenly moist, but not wet. Caladiums are heavy feeders, so need regular fertilization during the growing season, especially container-grown plants. Use a low-nitrogen or balanced formulation, as too much nitrogen can affect leaf color.



Caladium ‘Thai Beauty’.

Caladiums thrive in the hot and humid conditions of summer, but will start to droop and lose leaves as temperatures cool. If the tubers are to be kept over the winter in temperate areas, they must be brought in before the first frost (or before soil temperatures drop below 55F). Lift any tubers in the ground, remove most of



Caladiums thrive in hot and humid conditions.

the soil, and allow to dry for a week in a warm, shady spot before cutting off the leaves and storing in dry sphagnum moss or a mesh bag under mild conditions (55-60F) for up to five months. Tubers in containers can be brought inside and left undisturbed in the pots for the winter. Allow the growing medium to dry out as the leaves die back. The containers can be kept in bright or dark conditions, but the temperature should never be below 55F. Begin watering again when new growth appears in the spring.

As a houseplant, provide a warm location with bright but indirect light, and lots of humidity. Even indoors, caladiums will enter dormancy after a few months in leaf. When their leaves start to die back, stop watering. Allow the plant to rest and resume watering once new growth starts.



A caladium grown as a houseplant.

Caladiums have few pest problems, especially in northern areas. Tuber rot – both in storage or once planted – usually occurs under cool conditions, and can generally be avoided by proper storage and planting procedures. Leaf burn or scorch typically occurs on thin-leaved cultivars from too much sun, not enough water, or fertilizer sitting on the leaves. Propagate caladiums by dividing the tubers in spring before potting them up. Cut the tuber into pieces that contain at least one eye or knob; allow the cut pieces to dry for a few days to callous over before planting. All parts of the plant are poisonous if enough is ingested and handling the plants can irritate the skin of sensitive individuals.

Cultivars

There are thousands of caladium cultivars to choose from; these are some of the more popular cultivars.

Cultivar	Type	Leaf color	Leaf size	Height (inches)	Sun tolerance	Weeks in leaf
Aaron	Fancy-leaved	Creamy white center with white vein and dark green margins	M-L	12-18	some	20
Candidum	Fancy-leaved	White with green veins	M-L	12-24	yes	21
Candidum Jr.	Strap-leaved	White with green veins	S	16-12	some	21
Carolyn Whorton	Fancy-leaved	Pink with red veins and green margin	L-XL	18-30	some	23
Fannie Munson	Fancy-leaved	Mainly pink with rose-colored veins traced with light green	L-XL	18-30	some	19
Florida Sweetheart	Strap-leaved	Pinkish-red center with green edge	S	6-12	some	



Aaron



Candidum



Candidum Jr.



C. Whorton



Fannie Munson



FL Sweetheart

Freida Hemple	Fancy-leaved	Dark red centers with wide green margins	M-L	12-24	yes	18
Gingerland	Strap-leaved	Creamy white with red speckles and green margins	S-M	8-14	yes	
June Bride	Fancy-leaved	Pastel green with lighter veins	M-L	12-24	some	19
Miss Muffett	Strap-leaved	Lime green to chartreuse speckled with maroon or deep red and often red veins	S	10-14	no	
Pink Beauty	Fancy-leaved	Pink with red veins and pink-speckled green margins	M-L	12-24	yes	20
Pink Gem	Strap-leaved	Salmon pink center grading to green	S	6-12	some	24
Pink Symphony	Strap-leaved	Pink with green veins	S	15	some	23



Freida Hemple

Gingerland

June Bride

Miss Muffett

Pink Beauty

Pink Gem

P Symphony

Postman Joyner	Strap-leaved	Red with wide, medium green margin	M-L	12-24	yes	
Red Flash	Fancy-leaved	Dark red with pink spots and wide dark green margins	L-XL	18-30	yes	18
Red Frill	Strap-leaved	Wavy, red shading to green	S	6-12	no	21
Rosebud	Fancy-leaved	Pink center, surrounded by white and edged with green	M-L	12-24	yes	18
White Christmas	Fancy-leaved	Bright white with dark green veins and margins	M-L	12-24	no	19
White Queen	Fancy-leaved	Pure white leaves with thin red and green veins	M-L	12-24	yes	22
White Wing	Strap-leaved	White with curled edges stippled with green	S	18	some	22



Postman J.

Red Flash

Red Frill

Rosebud

White Xmas

White Queen

White Wing

Additional Information:

- Caladiums for the Home Landscape – North Carolina State University Horticulture Information Leaflet HIL-8517 at www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8517.html
- *Caladium bicolor* – on the Missouri Botanic Garden's Kemper Center for Home Gardening website at www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/plant-finder/plant-details/kc/a438/caladium-bicolor.aspx