

With the heat of summer now in full swing, they thrive. They offer great diversity in leaf shapes, sizes, patterning and coloration, making them more spectacular than many flowering plants. I recently ‘Googled’ them and 1,900,000 images popped up. One does not need a green thumb to grow them. They have always been one of my favorite plants to grow, and I do not think I have missed a year growing them. I planted some in our window boxes. I planted some directly in the soil of our shade garden, and still others I planted by themselves in their own containers. In fact, if I were to make a list of foliage plants, I would definitely rate them at the top of my list. Nothing compares to



their beauty. They are *Caladium hortulanum*, more commonly referred to as just caladiums.

*Caladium hortulanum* grows from a bulb-like structure called a tuber that is normally planted in the spring of the year; and, like many other spring-planted bulbs, must be lifted in the fall. If left outdoors through the winter, it will perish. For many people, the description I just gave spells too much work. Although caladiums do require a little more work than typical fall-planted bulbs like tulips and daffodils, the outstanding beauty of caladiums is worth the extra effort. Furthermore, if money is not an issue,

one could simply purchase new bulbs each spring and treat them as if they were annuals.

Caladiums are tropical by nature. In their native habitat, caladiums are perennials, but here, outdoors in Nebraska, they are grown as annuals. Although caladiums produce flowers, they are specifically grown for their gorgeous foliage. Caladiums are most attractive when mass planted. Their contrast with other plants creates a striking focal point.

The most commonly grown caladium is one called fancy-leaf. This variety has large heart-shaped leaves varying in length from six to sixteen inches, and it is capable of reaching heights of two feet or more. Its leaves exhibit color combinations of reds, pinks, whites and greens with prominently colored midribs and contrasting backgrounds and borders.



Caladiums perform best if grown in part shade to full shade; they prefer moist, warm soil. A minimum soil temperature of 70 degrees F is needed to get them growing. Caladium tubers become available at most Nebraska nursery centers beginning in March, obviously too soon to plant outdoors here in Nebraska. One can purchase potted caladiums in late spring for transplanting, but the best bargain is to purchase tubers. By late May, after the threat of frost is gone and soil temperatures become warm, I plant caladium tubers outdoors directly into the soil.

To maintain their beauty throughout the summer, caladiums require consistently moist soil with an occasional application of light fertilizer. In late summer when the leaves start to wither and die, one should stop fertilizing and cut back on the water. The tubers need to be lifted before the first frost. If time permits, the leaves should be allowed to completely dry and fall off naturally. Allow tubers to cure before storing indoors by placing them in the sun for a few days. Store tubers in a dark, dry, ventilated area with temperatures around 60 degrees F. This year I plan to experiment by

transferring some of my potted caladiums indoors after they have gone dormant, and there they will remain for the winter months. I have had great success storing calla lilies in this manner.

With the heat of summer in full swing, caladiums are now the showstoppers. They offer great diversity in leaf shape, size, and coloration. Currently, our caladiums are more spectacular than many of our flowering plants.