

# Tropical: Passing Trend Or Classic Style?

It seems that tropicals are here to stay; learn more about this trend to keep your tropical-flared customers happy.

By David Caras

**A**fter 10 years in ascendancy, tropicalissimo, the national gardening mania for oversized tropical foliage, flamboyant flowers and dense “destination-style” plantings, shows little sign of waning. In fact, as it continues to gain traction, the garden of tropical delights seems poised to make the leap from passing trend to classic influence, joining the ranks of the English cottage, French formal and xeriscape garden as an enduring gardening style.

Horticultural suppliers have added fuel to the fire, producing an increased range and supply of fabulous tropical or tropical-looking plants that make each growing season a new adventure for gardeners. Where very avant-gardeners may feel their elephant ears a bit frayed around the edges these days, mainstream gardeners are jumping into tropicals with gusto, and many master gardeners are finding renewed delight in the growing mix of the tropical-style plants now available. As with any gardening style, people are choosing the parts they like best. ▶



## Budding Genius

### Trendy tropicals

A hot garden trend is tropicals, many of which are summer bulbs.

#### Pots for special effects

- The No. 1 use of tropicals is in pots, used singly or in combinations
- Potted tall plants can be used as screens or to make an outdoor “room”
- Stately big plants, such as cannas and elephant ears, add drama
- Leafy plants, such as caladium, can soften walkways or walls

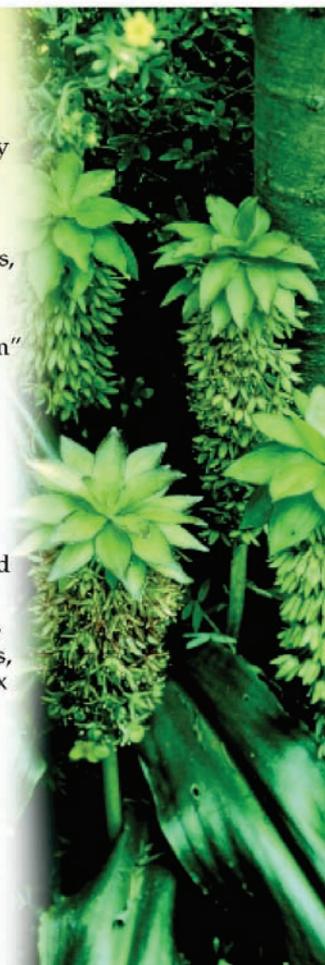
#### The art of layering

- Use towering plants and big-leafed bulbs to form the canopy
- Use plants with interesting foliage on the lower tier; here summer bulbs, such as eucomis (pictured right), mix well with annuals and perennials

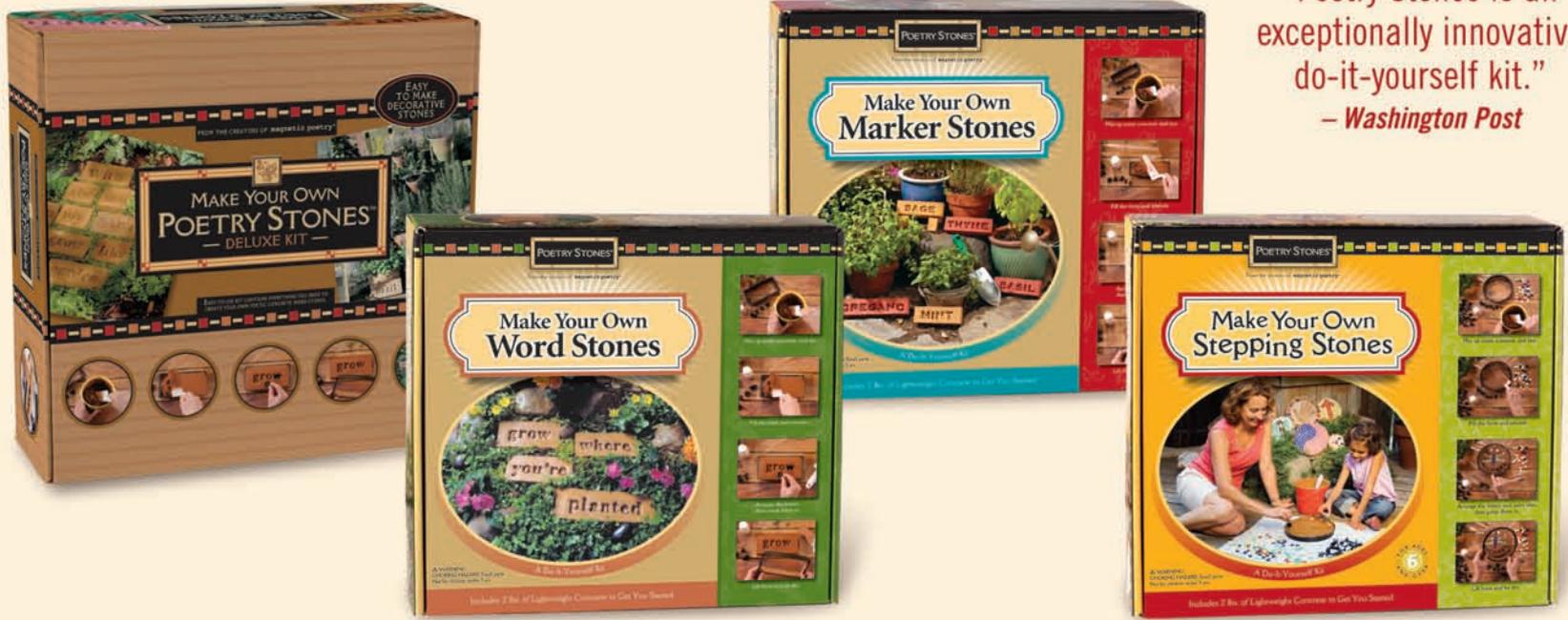
#### Adding sizzle

- Splashy, show-stopping summer bulbs, such as dahlias, lilies and gladioli, add zing to your garden
- Try planting them in pots, placing them in the spotlight

Source: Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center



Using large tropical plants can add a dramatic, eye-catching effect to the garden. (Photos courtesy of the Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center)



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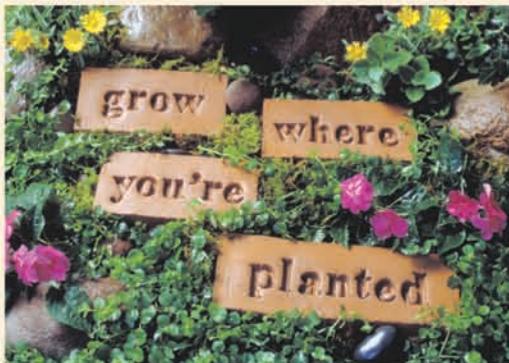
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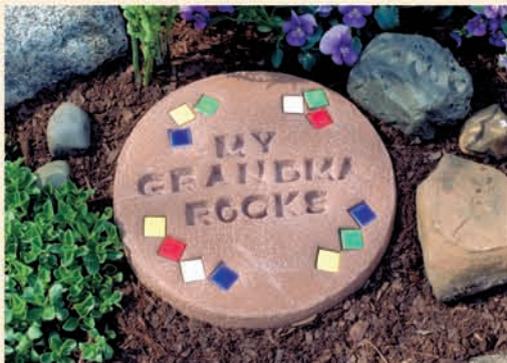
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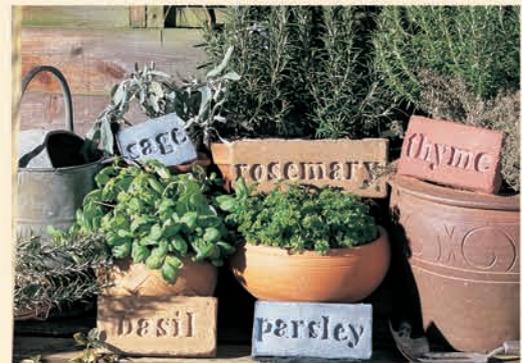
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### Tracking The Trend

“What’s most fun in gardening is creating plant combinations that achieve something from a design standpoint — establish a mood, create screening, frame an outdoor ‘room’ or pull one forward through the use of positioning or color,” says Sally Ferguson, director of the Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center in New York, N.Y. “Tropical-style plantings are terrific for this, offering intriguing combinations of dramatic plants with big leaves, fantastic foliage, flamboyant flowers and plenty of plant curiosities, from humungous to teeny-tiny.”

Many of the best tropical-style plants are summer bulbs sold in spring both as bare bulbs for planting and nursery-grown container plants, says Ferguson. But it’s the combination of tropical-looking bulbs, perennials and annuals that makes the style such fun, she notes. The following are a few ways you can suggest gardeners use summer bulbs and other tropical-looking plants in the summer garden.



### Pots, Pots, Pots

Important or imposing pots placed solo in the landscape can be dramatic. Pots placed in garden beds can achieve creative effects by varying heights and composition. Smaller pots can even be placed in other pots, strategically positioned on the surface inside a larger rim, says Ferguson.

Pots can also be grouped to create special effects:

- Screening taller plants such as cannas, elephant ears and bananas can hide unsightly views or be grouped to create virtual rooms in the yard or garden.
- Flamboyant, stately or just plain huge plants can make dramatic statements. Top bulb candidates include elephant ears, calla lilies, cannas, lilies and more.
- Softening leafy plantscapes can soften harsh settings such as walkways, walls or sidewalk areas. Try caladiums, callas, gingers and elephant ears.



**Top:** Consumers love tropicals because of their bright, bold colors. It gives them a sense of being in the tropics. **Bottom:** Using interesting and unique pots can really make a difference when displaying tropicals.

### Artful Layering

For the more adventurous, layering tropical plants high and low, over and under, can be satisfying and fun. Again pots are perfect, says Ferguson, but planting right in the garden is also a good bet. “The idea is to create an overall atmosphere of lush abundance,” she says, “where a mix of low- and medium-height plants fills in

under a canopy of taller, and even towering, plants.”

The lower tiers might feature plants with interesting foliage such as oxalis, caladiums, gingers, callas and eucomis. Elegant accent plants with nice flowers might include begonias, tigridias, sprekelias, polianthes and *Amaryllis belladonna*.

For the middle tier, bring on the tall and large-leafed plants. Among

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hardy; 10-foot tall *Musa basjoo* (Japanese banana), for instance, is hardy in USDA Zones 5-11.)

### Layered Leaves

Foliage provides swing and sway in a garden and comes in all manners of shape, form, color, size and

texture. Good gardeners enjoy the game of mixing foliage and flowers to create dynamic effects. It's fun to play with compositions of shape (narrow, wide, ovoid, round) in various forms (tight, compact, airy) while playing colors off one another (green in all hues, black, chartreuse,

magenta, gray, rust, ochre, white, pink, variegated, splotted, etc.).

For these compositions, the more plants to choose from the better. Richly colored annuals (coleus, alternanthera, etc.) and perennials (astilbe, hypericum, etc.) mix beautifully with summer bulbs (caladium, ▶

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**Top:** Tropicals can make colorful and artistic focal points in the garden. **Bottom:** Tropicals work well in a number of places in the garden, even around a pond to create a more appealing vision in the yard.

the best for adding mid-level volume are cannas and the various bulb plants commonly called "elephant ears" (xanthosoma, alocaasia and colocasia).

For the upper tier, options include towering castor beans, super-tall "extreme" cannas and the various musa or ornamental banana varieties that can shoot up to 10 or more feet tall in one season. (Some musa are unexpectedly winter-

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begonia, calla, ginger, dwarf canna, oxalis, sauromatum, eucomis, amorphophallus (umbrella arum), hedy-chium, agapanthus).

**Drama Queens**

Some splashy summer flowers are

scene-stealers. Count on these to strut their stuff: dahlias, nerines, begonias, liatris, lilies, eucomis, callas, hedy-chiums, gingers, tigridias, gladiolus, cur-cumas, hymenocallis, crinums and hippeastrums.

Drama queens perform best in the

spotlight, whether in full sun, partial shade or full shade. But don't limit sun-lovers to full sun positions. For dramatic pick-me-ups in the filtered light of the lower-tier tropical garden, it's easy to move pots of fully grown sun-loving plants into featured positions



Top: Using different pot heights and sizes can make an interesting attention grabbing garden. Bottom: Mixing colors of plants and hardgoods can make something not so exciting into a Broadway show.

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in dim light as they come into bloom. At this stage, reduced light will not affect their flowering, and the unexpected appearance of colorful blossoms there is fun and appealing.

"For gardeners who dig the hot house look," says Ferguson, "tropicalissimo is a terrific option. It's an exuberant garden style buoyed by the sheer fun of its plants and plant combinations. Sure, some are not winter hardy, but many are — or are easy to overwinter indoors. This looks like one trend that is here to stay."

David Caras is a partner at Ferguson Caras Public Relations and works heavily with the Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center. He can be reached by phone at (718) 693-4100 or E-mail at dcaras@fcpr.com.

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