

Hawaiian Fantasies

In hot and cold climates, colocasias create a tropical oasis.

By Fran Setbacken



From top: Colocasia group; 'Blue Hawaii'

A tropical garden transports us to that place within us that is the source of dreams. Who hasn't fantasized of tropical islands, warm breezes and the smell of sweet blossoms in the air? Tropical flora triggers sensations that take us away to carefree, blissful exotica.

As trends have predicted, tropical cultivars have become the perfect solution for many gardeners desiring dramatic impact, versatility, ease of maintenance and a garden setting that fosters tranquility and serenity. There is no better way to counteract the effects of our discouraging economic environment than surrounding ourselves with soothing, lush, verdant greenery. A Hawaiian tropical oasis, perhaps clustered around a pond or waterfall, would not be complete without the striking backdrop of colocasias.

Colocasia esculenta, also called "elephant ears," gets its name from the size of its leaves. Elephant ear plants can grow 8 feet tall in the tropics, and the leaves can reach 3 feet long and 2 feet wide; however, in the North, a height of 2 to 3 feet is more common, although still impressive. Thanks to their origin in tropical and subtropical areas, they love sunshine, heat and high humidity. They are easy to grow in sun or shade and are suited for many climates — not just the South. They can be considered annuals in cold climates or may be overwintered in basements or garages if needed.

A new series of colocasias in the marketplace is suddenly causing growers to perk up their "elephant ears." Consumer demand for new plant choices has led to innovative breeding breakthroughs developed by Dr. John Cho, plant pathologist at the University of Hawaii.

New Colocasia Breeding Breakthroughs

Dr. Cho is an internationally acclaimed breeder renowned for his breeding efforts to achieve disease-resistance in edible colocasias. He has applied his knowledge to breeding a new line of ornamental colocasias and has achieved outstanding success. This series features varieties unlike any available in today's



From top: Dr. John Cho, plant pathologist at the University of Hawaii; 'Pineapple Princess' at Atlanta Botanical Garden; 'Diamond Head' with Dr. Allan Armitage at the University of Georgia-Athens Gardens.

Colocasia at a Glance



- Hardiness: USDA Zone 7b (5° F); frost will trigger dormancy.
- Exposure: Full sun for best color.
- Soil: Rich, moist. Colocasias are wetland plants. Burnt leaf edges can be a sign of under-watering.
- Temperature: The warmer the better for fast growth.
- Fertilizing: Avoid overfeeding.

GREENGOODS



From left: 'Hilo Bay' at UGA Gardens; 'Hawaiian Eye'

market. Colocasias, originating in Southeast Asia more than 50,000 years ago, migrated eastward with civilization until arriving in Hawaii about 900 to 1,000 A.D. In Hawaii, colocasias, known as taro (kalo in Hawaiian), became a major source of sustenance along with breadfruit and sweet potato. Taro is revered in Hawaiian culture as a sacred food source. Growing taro was not merely an activity of food production; it was strongly bound to native culture and beliefs about cre-

ation. Mindful of the native beliefs about taro, ornamentals developed for the Royal Hawaiian Colocasia program do not use Hawaiian taro cultivars and instead combine the desirable attributes from other genetic sources.

Culture Information

Colocasias thrive in humid conditions. Ample soil moisture is a must. If planting in a container, consider a self-watering type with a reservoir. Larger pots will allow room for the underground corm and cormels to grow. When frost threatens, bring plants indoors to overwinter in a cool basement or garage that remains above freezing. For best results, provide southern exposure and don't let soil dry out. Wait for the last frost to plant outside.

For more information about the Royal Hawaiian Colocasia Series, visit www.royalhawaiiancolocasias.com. For liner sources, please contact PlantHaven, Inc. at (805) 569-9179.

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