

Caladiums ~ A Colorful Choice for Shady Beds

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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

Caladiums are a great, low-maintenance bedding plant for shady areas. Caladiums have attractive foliage and thrive in the heat and humidity of our long summers.

If you ask me what some of my favorite plants for summer color are, caladiums would absolutely be on the list. Caladiums have been a part of Galveston County landscapes since the 1800's and are still valued today for their colorful spring/summer display.

Gardeners crave color in shady areas of their landscapes just as much as they

do in sunny areas. Unfortunately, shade-loving plants are generally not so flamboyant, and the selection of colorful bedding plants for shady gardens is limited. Thank goodness for caladiums.

Caladiums are great, low-maintenance bedding plants and have attractive foliage. The part of a caladium we see and enjoy is the leaves

that are produced from underground tubers we generally refer to as "bulbs." However, they are botanically known as corms. Heart-shaped leaves are 6 to 12 inches across on plants that reach heights of 1-2 feet.

Caladiums will quickly provide color in the landscape when planted 8-12 inches apart. And they



will grow larger and more beautiful throughout the summer and have a peak performance in late summer to early fall. And one investment in caladiums can provide years of color.

I have grown caladiums here in Texas in addition to when I lived in Oklahoma. A key factor in growing vigorous, healthy plants is starting out with high-quality bulbs (corms). I have purchased caladiums in mesh bags at big box stores and other nursery outlets. Caladiums can be purchased in mesh bags containing 12-to-20 (or more) 25 bulbs. These bulk packages typically contain #2 size bulbs which are the smallest size (1-to-1.5 inches in diameter) bulbs available.

Tubers are available in different sizes based on the diameter of bulbs. The larger the tuber, the more leaf buds, so bigger tubers will produce a larger foliage display. I strongly recommend that gardeners consider purchasing larger-sized bulbs that are classified as "mammoth" or "jumbo" size. Members of the Galveston Garden Club are offering a wide selection of mammoth-size caladium bulbs which are about 2.5 to 3.5 inches diameter.

Larger bulbs produce noticeably larger-sized leaves and plants in the spring. Visit the Galveston Garden Club's website (<https://www.galvestongardenclub.org/>) for ordering information and plant descriptions. Pre-orders will be accepted online until Sunday, March 1.

Easy enough for the casual gardener to expect routine success, the caladium's elegant beauty also makes it a staple in the most accomplished gar-

deners' landscape. Native to tropical South America, caladiums grow from bulbs (corms) and thrive in the heat and humidity of our long summers. They are remarkably free of major insect pests or disease problems.

Caladiums are grown for their attractive foliage. The 6-to-12-inch heart-shaped leaves emerge from the ground on arching stems that are generally 1-to-2 feet tall but can grow taller. The foliage may be splashed with combinations of white, pink, rose, red, burgundy, chartreuse or green, often with several colors combining in wonderful patterns. These bright leaves with their bold texture embellish our shady gardens from spring until October when the tubers go dormant.

Most caladiums grow best in shade to part shade (two to four hours of direct sun, preferably morning) or bright dappled light. In these conditions, they produce the lushest growth with large, colorful leaves.

Some cultivars are more tolerant of sunny conditions and are successful in beds receiving part to full sun (six hours or more of direct sun) as long as they receive adequate irrigation. When grown in full sun, caladiums tend to produce smaller leaves and shorter plants.

In late September or early October, longer nights and cooler temperatures encourage caladiums to go dormant. But the tubers you plant this summer can be used to grow caladiums next year, either left in the ground or stored and replanted. If the beds where the caladiums are

planted has good soil drainage and the soil will not stay too wet during winter, you may simply leave the caladium tubers in the ground. However, when we experience extended period of wet weather conditions like the current winter, chances of bulb failure increases.

That is why I prefer digging up the bulbs and then storing them over the winter season. This is the most reliable and frugal way of making sure they grow another year. Dig caladiums when leaves turn yellow and most of the foliage begins to look "tired" and falls over.

Use a shovel or a garden fork to carefully lift the tubers, being sure to not damage them. Leaving the foliage attached, shake and brush off most of the soil from the tubers and lay them out in a single layer in a dry location sheltered from rain (such as a garage or under a carport). After the foliage becomes tan and papery in appearance, pull it from the tubers and store the tubers in paper bags indoors where temperatures stay around 70 degrees through winter.

With poor growing conditions, particularly in areas of heavy shade or sunny, dry locations, the plants will likely produce small, weak tubers that may not return well either left in the ground or dug and stored. Under the right circumstances and with proper care, however, the tubers you plant this year can provide a beautiful display again next year and for years to come.

