

Grow a tropical paradise in a container or garden

By Melinda Myers

Add an exciting new look to your garden, poolside, patio or deck with elephant ears. These easy tropical plants have tall stems and giant leaves that measure up to 2 feet across. You can use them to create an instant focal point in the garden, screen an unwanted view, or extend a bold welcome at the front door.

Elephant ears can be grown in containers as well as the garden, so if space is an issue, try some of the more compact varieties like Hawaiian Punch. You'll appreciate the impact this 3-foot tall plant makes with its red stems and bright green leaves with dark red veining.

Or go big with 6-foot tall Black Stem. Its smooth blue-green leaves are displayed atop striking purple-black stems. Variegated varieties are another option. The unusual foliage of Mojito, is decorated with blue-black dashes and splashes. No two leaves are alike on this beauty. For even more color and drama, don't miss Black Magic. Its dark, blue-black leaves measure 2 feet across and can grow up to 5-feet tall.

These are just a few of the many varieties that are well suited to home gardens. In warm areas (zones 9 to 11) elephant ears can be grown outdoors year-round. In cooler areas (zones 4-8) the plants are grown as annuals or can be brought indoors for the winter.



Elephant ears, like this Black Stem variety, can be grown in the garden or in containers. Photo/Longfield-Gardens.com

Give these bold beauties a space of their own or combine them with other interesting foliage plants such as caladiums, coleus, larger begonias, trailing sweet potato vines and other annuals. The fine leaves of ornamental grasses, such as shade tolerant Japanese forest grass and sedges, contrast nicely with the elephant ears' bold leaves.

Elephant ears are tropical plants that need warm soil and plenty of moisture all season long. They are happy to grow in sun or shade, though in hot climates the leaves need to be protected from midday sun. Fertilizing every two to three weeks will help your plants reach their full potential.

Elephant ears are available as spring-planted bulbs or as potted plants. The baseball-sized tubers can be planted outdoors after all danger of frost has passed and the soil has

warmed to at least 65 degrees. Prepare the soil by adding compost or other organic matter prior to planting. Dig a hole large enough to accommodate the tuber and plant it pointy side up. The top of the tuber should be about an inch below the soil surface.

If you live in a cold climate and want to get an early start on the season, plant the tubers in containers filled with well-drained potting mix and grow them in a warm, sunny window for four to six weeks. Move the plants outdoors when the soil is warm and the danger of frost has passed.

Your tropical paradise awaits. Just choose a few containers or locate some spots in the garden where you can include these bold-leafed beauties. Before you know it, you'll be sipping your favorite beverage in your very own tropical garden.

Melinda Myers has written numerous books, including "Small Space Gardening." She hosts the Great Courses "How to Grow Anything: Food Gardening For Everyone" DVD set and "Melinda's Garden Moment" TV and radio program.