



A TASTE OF THE TROPICS

Just because we live in a cold winter climate doesn't mean we can't enjoy a taste of the tropics for at least part of the year. Many tropical plants grow very well in containers and are adaptable to a wide range of light conditions. What's more, unlike some of their more northerly relatives, they can take whatever heat and humidity our climate has to offer, flourishing and prospering even through summer's "dog days." They contribute brilliant color and bold leaf shapes that are rare among our typical Zone 5 plants, adding vibrancy and contrast to container or landscape plantings. As an added bonus, many of these exotic beauties can be enjoyed as houseplants or dug up and stored to keep through several seasons.

Nothing says "the tropics" like a lush, bold, large-leafed plant, and Alocasia (Elephant Ears) certainly fits that description. Their strong, upright stems and huge, arrow or heart-shaped leaves make a dramatic statement in large patio containers or shady borders. Grow 'Frydek' for its deep, velvety, emerald green foliage with contrasting white veins, or, for an unusual camouflage effect, try 'Hilo Beauty'—its impressive green leaves are ir-

regularly marked with chartreuse, creamy white and yellow, creating a striking play of colors that really stands out in the shade. Both varieties grow to about 2 to 3 feet tall in containers, and prefer partial shade and moderately fertile, consistently moist soil. Fertilize every two to three weeks with a balanced fertilizer. These plants do not tolerate temperatures much below 50° but overwinter well as houseplants if the environment is kept humid enough.

For brilliant color, consider *Acalypha wilkesiana* or Copperleaf, a multi-hued foliage plant resembling *Coleus*. This member of the Euphorbia family is a shrub in its native habitat, but it also thrives in containers. 'Ceylon' features attractive, rounded foliage that starts out green but matures to a rich mahogany shade, with silvery undersides and coral-rose, scalloped edges. Reaching 18 to 24 inches tall, it prefers sun to light shade in average to rich, moisture retentive soil. Another member of the *Acalypha* genus, *Chenille Plant*, has rich green foliage, and is admired for its unusual, pendulous, tassel-like, fuzzy catkins in brilliant shades of red to purple. Try growing *Chenille Plant* in a hanging basket so that the flower show can be en-

joyed at eye level. Both *Copperleaf* and *Chenille* plants perform well as houseplants when given enough humidity and grown in a sunny location.

Pump up the color even more with a planting of *Iresine*, also known as *Beefsteak Plant* because of its brilliant, often red-toned foliage. This South American native is a member of the *Amaranthus* family, and it performs wonderfully in containers, by itself, or as contrast to green-leafed companions. 'Blazin Rose' features bright rose, pink, and dark red foliage and has an open, mounding habit that makes it ideal for mixed pots, window boxes or hanging baskets, or as edging in the landscape. It grows 12 to 14 inches tall and up to 20 inches wide. For large containers, try 'Sun Ray Yellow,' an upright variety growing to 20 inches in height, and featuring bright green foliage, yellow veining, and contrasting red stems. 'Purple Lady' sports dark purple foliage and a trailing habit good for groundcover or tumbling over the edges of a large planter where its rich color will contrast well with flowers or foliage of almost any hue. *Beefsteak Plant* needs full sun for the best leaf color and should be pinched to increase bushiness. Fertilize regularly

during the growing season. Iri- For more height, plant 'Black Liven up a shady location with sine does well as a houseplant Knight.' It features red flowers Porphyrocoma 'Maracas,' also when kept evenly moist and and blue-black leaves and grows known as Brazilian Fireworks. grown in moderate light condi- up to 5 feet tall. 'Pretoria' is a This attractive plant could be tions. Reduce water and fertilizer striking, colorful variety reaching grown just for its lush, variegated over the winter. up to 7 feet in height, with orange green and silvery white foliage, flowers and green and yellow-

For those who desire brilliant striped foliage. Regardless of splashy, brilliant deep pink and flowers with their foliage, Cannas height, all Cannas need full sun purple flowers, which bloom all cannot be beat. These showy, and fertile soil. Water them dur- summer long. Feature it in a exotic flowers are available in a ing dry spells, and remove faded shady garden corner or plant it in wide range of dazzling hues, and blossoms to ensure continuous a container where it will really plants vary in size from dwarf, bloom. If you want to keep them stand out from its green compan- container varieties to towering for the next season, remove the ions. Growing only 8 to 10 giants for the back of the border. blackened stems and leaves in inches tall, this showy plant stays For the container, try 'Pink Sun- fall after frost has foliage. Store neat all summer and is a good burst,' featuring salmon pink flow- the rhizomes in barely moist peat candidate to over-winter as a ers and maroon, green and moss in a cool, frost-free location houseplant in moderate light. cream-striped foliage, or 'Red and plant out again in late spring Outside, Brazilian Fireworks pre- Futurity,' with crimson red flowers or early summer when tempera- fers a location in shade to part and burgundy foliage. Both va- tures are consistently warm. shade in moist, well-drained soil. rieties stay only 2 to 3 feet tall.