

CALADIUMS *for a Tropical Touch*



by Kathleen A. Mills



IN THE GARDEN

photo by Ira Beckoff



Caladiums are ideal for containers. Here 'Pink Beauty' flourishes in full sun in the vegetable and herb garden at The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's headquarters.

The 18th Century garden as well as the vegetable and herb gardens at The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's headquarters are tended by 15 dedicated volunteer gardeners. Each gardening season these display gardens are planted with annuals. We enjoy using new plants as well as pushing horticultural rules to their limits. During the summer of 1993 we planted shade-loving *Caladium x hortulanum* to

accent the base of an urn in our vegetable garden. We chose a dark-leaved variety just to tempt fate. 'Pink Beauty' performed well in the full-sun site and brought kudos from the public as well as the volunteers.

With this success under our belts we decided that more was better and that we'd try planting caladium in the formal garden next season. Located in a protected site, the formal garden has a full-sun exposure. The

continued

CALADIUMS

photo by Ira Beckoff



White leaved *C. 'Aaron'* gently billows over the vinca and the edges of the parterres in the formal garden. Passersby enjoy the lush tropical feel of the garden contrasted against the formality of the garden's structure.

soil is in excellent condition because we add peat yearly. In mid-May of 1994 we planted 200 caladium bulbs of the white-leaved 'Aaron' in four of the garden's parterres. For four weeks we watched rather impatiently for 'Aaron' to make an appearance. By mid-June we saw the first tender shoots begin to push through the soil. It wasn't until July that we were enjoying beautiful caladium, dancing in the breeze, adding a tropical flavor to our center-city garden.

Cultural requirements

Caladiums are tuberous roots that require attentive watering through their growing season. They prefer a rich, loam soil making them great candidates for container growing. Although the books warn of leaf bleaching in the full sun, our white and pink varieties performed well. Adequate water and good soil made that possible. If your soil isn't perfect and you tend not to be a reliable waterer, then your caladium will need a shady spot. The large white-leaved

varieties brighten up the shadiest of corners and have a great visual effect when massed.

If you aren't patient enough to wait for July to see your caladiums, start them indoors and set outside after the last frost. Caladiums will wait either in pots or in the ground until the soil temperature approaches 60°F before they make their

move. The spathe-like flowers are inconspicuous and should be removed, as they slow leaf growth.

Storage

Caladiums are not hardy in our region, so they need to be dug and stored indoors over the winter. Once temperatures drop to 55°F the leaves will begin to droop. That's your signal to prepare the bulbs for winter storage. Before frost, dig the caladiums from the garden, leaving any soil that adheres to the bulbs. Dry outside in a place away from direct sun for about one week. Once dried, remove the foliage and excess soil from the bulb. Store at 55°-60°F in dry peat.

Caladiums offer a great variety of choices to the gardener who is looking for something a little different and who doesn't mind a little bit of work. *Caladium x hortulanum* varieties vary in size from 10 in. to 48 in. and are available in a wide array of color variations.

Here at PHS we're glad we planted the caladiums in the garden. Our patience paid off with a great show from July through late October that delighted visitors and gardeners alike. In the ground or in containers, caladiums are great performers!

Did You Know . . .

When planting caladiums

- plant bulb right side up for large leaf size
- plant bulb upside down to get more, but smaller leaves

For More Information

The following books are available in the PHS Library:

Bulbs, John E. Bryan, Editor, Hearst Garden Guides, Hearst Books, New York, 1992.

Burpee American Gardening Series: Bulbs, Suzanne Frutig Bales, Prentice Hall, New York, 1992.

Classic Bulbs: Hidden Treasures for the Modern Garden, Katherine Whiteside, Villard Books, New York, 1991.

Sources

Caladium bulbs are readily available at garden centers. Here are a few mail-order sources:

Dutch Gardens
P.O. Box 200
Adelphia, NY 07710-0200
908-780-2713

K. Van Bourgondien & Sons, Inc.
245 Farmingdale Road
Babylon, NY 11702
1-800-552-9996

Kathleen Mills is a horticulturist for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.