ORGANICALLY GREEN
HORTICULTURAL SERVICES

Fall Newsletter, 2019

Over the years, as different cultivars have become readily available, tropical plants have become more common place in our summer beds and pots.

One of the most impressive examples of this are the leafy tropical, elephant ears. Although thought to be one plant, there are three genera, *Colocasia*, *Alocasia*, and *Xanthosoma.* that make up what we commonly refer to as elephant ears. Even though they look similar, there are a few ways to tell them apart. *Colocasia's* have a heart shaped leaf whose tip points downward, *Alocasia's* point upward and *Xanthosoma's* leaf have a sagittate or arrowhead shape. (See picture)

These plants belong to the Araceae or Arum family which is mostly made up of tropical plants with a few exceptions such as Jack-in-the-pulpits (*Arisaema triphyllum).* This group is characterized by their distinctive flower which is made up of a column of tiny flowers (spadix) that has a leaf-like structure (spathe) behind or surrounding it. Other members of this family include calla lilies (*Zantedeschia spp.*), *Philodendron*, *Caladium*, *Diffenbachia* and the peace lily *(Spathiphyllum).*

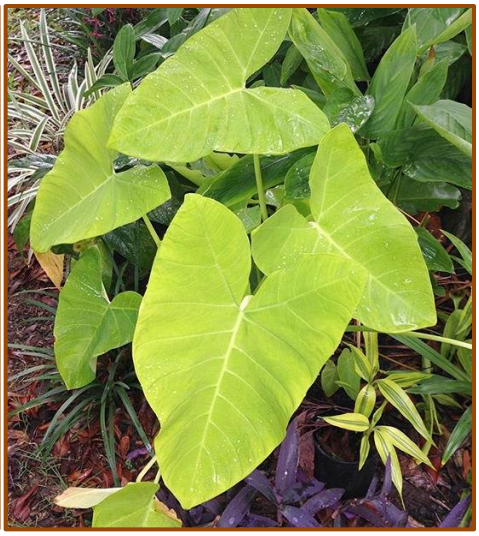
While elephant ears can flower, they do not commonly produce them and if in fact they do, most of the time it is hidden by the foliage. The flower can sometimes be fragrant and is typical of this family with a white, yellow or light green spathe surrounding the spadix.

Colocasia's and *Alocasia's* are native to tropical portions of southern Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Guinea, parts of Australia and the Pacific Islands. While *Xanthosoma's* are native to tropical areas of the America's.

When planting the corm in our non-tropical area, the soil temperature needs to be above 50°F and past all danger of frost. Elephant ears also do well when planted in a soil that has a high organic

Colocasia

Alocasia



Xanthosoma

matter content. Generally, plant the tubers in a full sun to part sun area about 2'-4' apart with the growing tip pointed up. If you're able, you can start the tubers inside about 6-8 weeks before the last frost. After planting, use a low rate of a slow release fertilizer and make sure to keep them adequately watered throughout the season. *Colocasia's* and *Xanthosoma's* need high moisture whereas *Alocasia's* prefer a moist but well drained soil. Elephant ears also require a little bit of housekeeping during the season. Remove the old leaves as they start to wilt, brown or if they have a ragged appearance.

Flower of the peace lily (Spathiphyllum)

The tubers will not survive over the winter in the ground and must be dug and brought indoors. After the first frost, cut the foliage back to about six inches. Then place them in a pot with a mix of peat moss and soil, add water and store them in a cool dark place for the winter. Check on them periodically, ensuring that soil stays moist but not wet.

However, these plants are not grown only for their ornamental beauty but also as a food source. For thousands of years Polynesians have cultivated colocasia's, cooking the tuber and mashing it. In fact, all parts of *Colocasia esculenta,* better known as taro, can be eaten but the plant contains calcium oxalate crystals and must be cooked prior to ingestion. Currently, there are over 200 cultivars grown for either their culinary uses or ornamental characteristics. (*Alocasia's* are closely related to *Colocasia's* and are also referred to as "taro". *Xanthosoma's* are also edible and go by several names such as tannia or malanga in the produce world.)

According to Purdue University, "Two Araceae are attaining world importance as energy foods: the cocoyam, taro or dasheen (*Colocasia esculenta*), originating from Oceania and Southeast Asia, and the tannia, yautia or new cocoyam (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*) from the American tropics. The usable parts in both species are the subterranean tuberous stems which, in the case of the latter, contain between 15 and 39 percent of carbohydrates, 2 to 3 percent of protein and 70 to 77 percent of water; both have a nutritional value comparable to the potato and are probably easier to digest. A secondary use is of consumption of the young leaves, similar to spinach, and this is more common with *X. sagittifolium* than in the case of the taro.

Cultivation of tannia or yautia must be very old in the New World. It may have originated in the northern part of South America and spread through the Antilles and Mesoamerica. When the Europeans arrived, it was known from southern Mexico to Bolivia, but was possibly more intensive in the Antilles. Domestication may have occurred in various places and with different materials and was based on processes such as roasting and cooking the tubers, thereby eliminating the irritant substances, calcium oxalate crystals and saponins."

As elephant ears gain more notoriety, we are sure to see new cultivars popping up in gardens everywhere!

We offer the following services:

Landscape Services:

- Ornamental & Mature Tree Pruning
- Seasonal Displays
- Spring Bulb Planting
- Tree and Shrub Maintenance & Removal
- Sod Installation
- Tree/Shrub Transplanting
- Air Spading
- Radial Trenching
- Vertical Mulching
- Holiday Lighting

Plant Healthcare Services:

- Tree/Shrub Plant Healthcare
- Fertilization Programs
- Anti-Desiccant Spraying
- Flying Insect
- Deer Repellent
- Organic Tick & Flea Control