

GROWING COLOCASIA

Saul Walker

My exotic garden on the outskirts of Plymouth contains many staple plants of the 'jungle' style, including gingers, bananas and brugmansia, but probably the most reliably big-leaved plants for that 'rainforest' look are colocasia, sometimes called elephant's ears, and I wouldn't be without them.

Growing these foliage head-turners is a lot easier than their exotic look suggests, and they easily make large, statement plants in the span of a growing season, looking particularly good in late summer and early autumn. Complementing not only exotic schemes like mine, they also make wonderful pond marginals and look great as part of a late summer bedding scheme as well.



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C. 'Blue Hawaii': metallic, blue-black stems and blue-veined leaves

Growing colocasia could not be easier: once growth begins in late spring there are only really two requirements needed to grow large clumps - lots of water and lots of feed. I grow all my colocasias in pots (although many will be planted out eventually), and every year I refresh the compost when I replot in spring after their winter dormancy, using plenty of John Innes No. 3 mixed in with my potting



Saul with *C. esculenta* 'Fontanesii', a hardy stoloniferous variety with black stems and huge, glossy, dark-veined green leaves



In the sub-tropics, *C. 'Jack's Giant'* leaves can reach two metres in size. In a pot, Saul's grow to just under a metre in a season.

compost. You could add granular, slow-release fertiliser if you preferred, instead.

I site my plants in plenty of sunshine and slowly increase the watering during late spring/early summer, until the root ball is kept regularly damp. I will also feed once a week until autumn with a balanced fertiliser.

The art of cultivating these wonderful exotics is in the overwintering, and the method you use depends entirely on the type of colocasia you want to grow. Colocasias can be split into three categories: stolon-producing, corm-producing, and non corm-producing plants.



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C. 'Black Coral' is much easier to overwinter than similar-coloured, non corm-producing C. 'Black Magic'

Corm-producing colocasia produce a large swollen base to their leaves, sometime visible above the soil. To store these, wait until the plant stops producing new leaves in roughly mid/late autumn and remove all the top foliage. At this point the plant will also have lost all its fibrous roots, so remove the plant from its pot or dig up from the ground and pot up into a pot just large enough to house the corm with some



© Saul Walker

Saul's current favourite colocasia, dusky-leaved C. 'Coal Miner'

Stolon-producing are possibly the easiest to overwinter; I find that these are the hardiest of colocasias, with many able to withstand frost quite easily. If grown in an open border, treat it like an overwintering dahlia.



© Saul Walker

Stolons growing from the base of C. 'Pink China' - one of the hardiest varieties and ideal for the beginner. It has large green leaves and pinkish stems.

room around the edges (use a multipurpose compost mix). This can then be stored in a frost-free greenhouse or shed and kept barely damp until spring.

Non corm-producing colocasia are the hardest to overwinter, and the key to success seems to be to keep them growing during winter, either as a houseplant or in a heated greenhouse or conservatory. Great care must be taken with watering to keep the plant going while avoiding root rot. This type of colocasia tend to suit the warmer climates of the sub-tropics, and many growers keep these plants as annuals, either replacing the plants or growing from seed each year.

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