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Horticulture News

By: Scott Eckert, Harvey County Extension Agent, Horticulture

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One thing about plants is we never seem to run out of possibilities when it comes to our landscapes! Caladiums add spectacular tropical color to shade gardens. Grown for their shapely, colorful foliage, they withstand intense summer heat and make excellent borders, containers and garden specimen plants. The flowers are small and insignificant in appearance.

Caladiums are divided into two types: fancy-leafed and lance, or strap-leafed, varieties. The fancy-leafed are large, broad, heart-shaped leaves on long petioles with a defined depression (ear) where the petiole joins the leaf. The lance types are smaller leafed (earless) and short stemmed. The newer varieties of the lance-leafed are more tolerant of rain, wind and sun than fancy-leafed types.

Caladiums prefer shade or early morning sun. Caladiums are grown from round tubers that range from 1 to 2 inches in diameter. Caladiums are sensitive to cold. They should not be planted in the ground until June. Start caladiums indoors in April in flats or pots. Plant the tuber, bumpy side up, 2 inches deep in a peat moss-based soil. Keeping the soil warm and wet is important. The soil needs to be moist, but if it is too wet, roots can die from lack of oxygen. The soil temperature needs to be above 70°F for growth. If the temperature is cooler than 70°F, growth will stall, and it may take months for the tuber to recover. Get a jump start by soaking the tubers in warm water (120°F) for an hour before planting.

After the roots emerge in 2 to 3 weeks, fertilize weekly with a liquid, 1-1-1, slow-release fertilizer. The caladiums can be grown in pots until the outdoor soil temperature is above 70°F. When planting caladium bulbs directly outdoors, wait until the soil temperature rises around the first part of June. Soak the bulb in warm water for about one hour and plant the bulbs bumpy side up, 2 inches deep into the garden. Amend the soil using a 1- to-1 ratio of soil and peatmoss and keep the location moist. Do not allow the soil to dry. Be patient – it takes several weeks for the caladiums to emerge.

On larger caladium tubers, (2 to 3 inches in diameter) there is a dominant bud. The large bud surrounded by smaller buds, may be “de-eyed” to produce more, but smaller leaves. This is done by inserting the tip of a small sterile knife 1/4-inch deep into the dominate bud. By destroying this bud, the smaller buds are stimulated to grow. A tuber that is not de-eyed would be 12 inches tall with 10 to 12 leaves. The de-eyed tuber will be 2 inches shorter and produce around 20 leaves that are somewhat smaller.

In the autumn when nights are cool, caladiums will fade. Withhold water until foliage dies. After foliage is dead, the tuber may be dug and stored to be replanted in the spring. Store the resting bulbs in a well ventilated mesh bag filled with peatmoss or cottonseed hulls. The key is to keep the bulbs from rotting and prevent dehydration. Store the bulbs above 55°F and mist occasionally. The bulbs, which actually only rest and do not go completely dormant, need to be stored for at least eight weeks before the buds will produce new foliage.