

News from the Watershed

## **Caladiums: A Colorful Choice for Landscaping**

One of the unique things about Highlands County, Lake Placid in particular, is that it is one of the few places in the world that caladiums are grown.

Caladiums are shade loving plants that originate from the rain forests of the Amazon Basin. They are members of the Araceae family and the genus Caladium; they are indigenous to Brazil and neighboring areas of South America and Central America. They grow in open areas of the forest and on the banks of creeks and go dormant during the dry season. Caladiums grow from corms and can be propagated by dividing the tubers. They thrive in the warmer climates and prefer shady areas.

These beautiful, ornamental plants are known for their colorful foliage. The heart shaped leaves range in coloration and patterns of pink, red, green and white. The size of the plant depends on the size of the tuber. Large tubers will produce plants with large leaves, while smaller tubers produce plants with smaller leaves. While growing in the wild, caladiums may grow 15 to 35 inches tall, with leaves mostly from 5 to 17 inches long and broad.

Dr. Nehrline, known as Florida's Premier Botanist, is given credit for introducing the colorful plant to Florida agriculture. Dr. Nehrline did his work and research from 1886-1929. He had a true passion for horticulture and introduced numerous new plants to Florida in his day. Caladiums were first grown in the Lake Placid area in the early 1940's and today caladiums are primarily grown right here in the Central Florida region.

One of the reasons that caladiums are so popular is the simple growing requirements. The tubers can be planted directly into ground beds after the danger of frost has gone. They grow best in moist, well drained soil. Caladiums can also be grown in pots and it is recommended that tubers are used. Depending on the size of plant you want, use either several small tubers or a combination of small and large tubers in the pot. Another advantage of the caladium is that insects are not generally a problem.

The caladium plant is considered poisonous and should not be consumed. The plant may cause irritation to the lips and will also irritate sensitive skin. Caladiums can be a problem to children who ingest the leaves as well as to family pets that might nibble on the foliage. So make sure to educate the kids about the plant and keep the pets away.

Generally, when you want to purchase caladiums, you would buy the tubers. These come in various sizes including mammoth (3 ½ inches), jumbo (2 ½ inches – 3 ½ inches), No. 1 (1 ½ inches to 2 ½ inches) and No. 2 (1 inch to 1 ½ inches). Caladiums may also be purchased as seedlings or full sized plants.

There are many different varieties of caladiums and they make beautiful landscape plants. So, if you want to add some color to your home or yard, contact one of your local Caladium growers and find out more. The Caladium Festival, held in Lake Placid each year, will be celebrated this month from the 24<sup>th</sup> through the 26<sup>th</sup>.