

Creating a Tropical Paradise

"Tropical landscapes are more than a 'look,' they're an 'attitude!'" This declaration is by Norman Winter, horticulturist with Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service. I think Norman's right. Creating a tropical garden requires a willingness to go "bold." It is like looking at personalities expressed in clothing. One person feels comfortable in pale pink; another is at home wearing bold jungle patterns.

So, let's take a look at keeping the bold folks happy, without feeling we need a rain forest of irrigation to keep the garden alive. Tropical can be water thrifty and there's plenty to offer for a shady or sunny garden, in ground or in containers, formal and informal, or jungle!

Palms and sagos are naturals, as is variegated ginger, *Alpinia zerumbet*. Variegated ginger, with its broad light green and white leaves, offers strong contrast to Philippine violet, *Barleria cristata*, a dark green shrub, with blue flowers. Hedges are easy, as Philippine violet roots from cuttings. Trim, to encourage branching and fullness when young. Keep evenly moist when young and when mature they will be drought tolerant. Both plants tolerate partial sun.

Another easy shrub is *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*, Bride of Barbados, with its bright orange and yellow flowers. I've seen varieties more deep pink, then orange one's, at River's End Nursery, Bayview. A relative, *Caesalpinia gilliesii*, the yellow Bird of Paradise, is not quite as "bold."

The tree, Bottlebrush, *Callistemon citrinus*, and the shrub, dwarf red powder puff, *Calliandra haematocephala*, variety "Nana," both work well in tropical landscapes, depending the height you need. Both like even moisture until well established, well balanced fertilizer and mulch. Once established (about 2 years) they are drought tolerant. Crotons, *Codiaeum variegatum*, are in abundance at local stores, with interesting leaf shapes, and they will tolerate partial sun.

Mexican heather, *Cuphea hyssopifolia*, is also a tropical benefitting from fertilizer, compost, mulch and trimming when young. With mulch, you'll water regularly only in summer. As they age, they multiply, so leave room and provide well drained soils. They are low maintenance, bloom frequently, and root from stem cuttings. *Duranta erecta*, Brazilian sky flower, is a vigorous shrub (8 to 10 feet). If you want it in a container, look for a single trunk and train as a tree. *Duranta* produces clusters of lavender flowers followed by gold berries. They need a balanced fertilizer, compost and mulch. Those with variegated leaves do not produce the amount of flowers as the standard green leafed ones. Both plants support butterflies and pollinators.

This is only the beginning of plant suggestions for a tropical landscape. Next week, I will continue with this "bold" discussion, touching on appropriate fruiting plants, vining plants and those that thrive in shade. For those interested in growing vegetables, our Vegetable Gardening class begins tomorrow night, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. and it runs Tuesday and Thursday, throughus at (956) 383-1026.

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