

Coloured leaves from the tropics

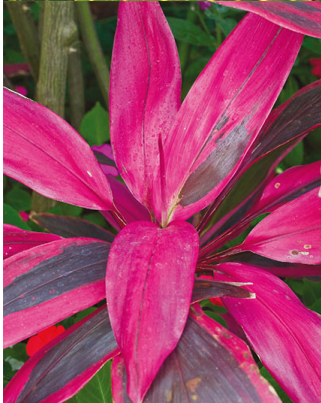
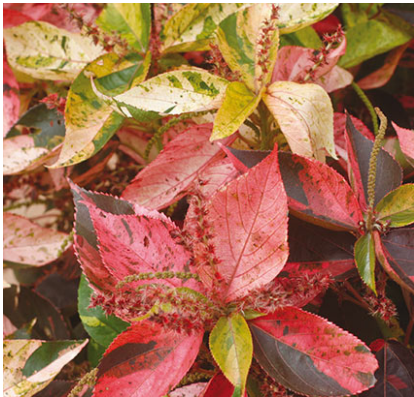
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Coloured leaves from the tropics

by Gerald Schofield

In the tropical climates around the globe, leaves are often as bright and colourful as the flowers



The hot, humid weather conditions of the tropics have resulted in myriads of plants with bright, colourful foliage. Like the tropical heat, the leaves on these plants are difficult to overlook, or forget once they've been experienced. They are bold, gaudy and in your face, standing out from the masses of green foliage that usually dominates the landscape. These foliage plants thrive in the warm, frost-free parts of South Africa, and many are grown as indoor plants in the cooler regions where they battle with winter cold.

Foliage plants form an important component of tropical and subtropical gardens, lending year-round colour and creating strong colour contrasts. One of the major benefits of decorative leaves is that they invariably maintain their good looks all year round. This attribute is sometimes spurned by gardeners who like a little seasonal variation in their garden. Whichever way you view this vibrant group of plants, they can be an invaluable addition to any frost-free garden. Most of these plants are shrubs or large, clump-forming perennials, although there are others of lesser stature that are classified as groundcovers. Some of these plants even grow in the shade and still maintain their colourful foliage, making them ideal for brightening up suitable shaded spots. There are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of different plant types that fit into this category, many of which are available locally. Some of the better-known tropical foliage plants worth considering for local homes and gardens include:



Cordyline fruticosa hybrids (ti plant or good luck plant):

Formerly known as ***Cordyline terminalis***, these multi-stemmed shrubs with an upright growth habit have terminal clusters of brightly coloured leaves. Their size, shape and colour can vary enormously, with numerous named hybrids in cultivation. They do best in light to deep shade, although some of the darker-coloured foliated forms cope with full-day sunshine. Flowers are small and white and occur in drooping racemes that are totally dominated by the foliage.

Cordyline banksii hybrids (forest cabbage tree):

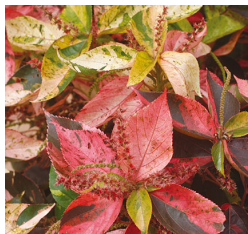
These cordylines can withstand more winter cold than most tropical plants with coloured foliage. They have thin, strap-like leaves, usually green or plum in colour, and grow as multi-stemmed shrubs. Two new hybrids with colourful foliage have just been released recently: "**Electric Pink**" has purple leaves with pink striations, while "**Electric Star**" has green leaves with brown stripes. Cordylines grow best in full sun or light shade and make great plants for large pots or ornamental urns.



Codiaeum variegatum (croton):

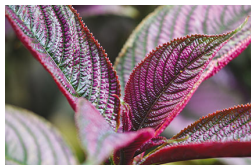
A common shrub in the tropics, crotons seem to have amongst the greatest variety of leaf shapes, sizes and colour combinations of all foliage plants. They must be grown in well-drained soil, be protected from cold

winds and be pruned back hard when they become old and woody. They are useful shrubs for hot, dry gardens, while some hybrids can be used as indoor plants with their colourful, waxy leaves and lowlight tolerance.



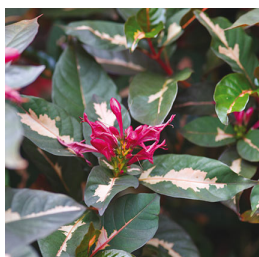
Acalypha wilkesiana hybrids (copper leaf):

These tough and enduring shrubs have been used for hedging and boundary plantings for seemingly ages, and many old hedges can still be seen in mature gardens. Today, smaller-growing, more compact plants are used as feature shrubs in mixed plantings. Again, a wide range of leaf forms exist, mostly with hybrid names that describe the plant. ***Acalyphas*** grow in sun or very light shade and benefit from being pruned back hard every second spring season to keep plants neat and compact.



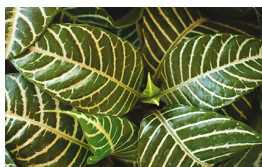
Strobilanthes dyerianus (Persian shield):

This quick-growing shrub has uniquely coloured leaves that have a distinctly metallic sheen, the rich purple and green colours gleaming with a silver overtone. ***Strobilanthes*** develop into wide, spreading shrubs a little over 1 m in height, producing small mauve flowers in early spring. Prune the plants back after flowering to keep them in shape. They do best in light to deep shade.



Graptophyllum pictum (caricature plant):

These heat- and drought-tolerant shrubs are adorned with richly coloured foliage that shows off the attractive cerise-pink flowers. They grow into tidy, compact bushes and grow in sun or shaded positions. Again, regular pruning immediately after flowering ensures healthy new growth.



Aphelandra squarrosa (saffron spike):

This popular indoor plant has waxy green leaves with conspicuous cream or white veins that create a striped pattern. The stems are topped annually with a spike of yellow flowers. ***Aphelandras*** can be grown outdoors in only the warmest of climates, in a protected, shaded position.



Pseuderanthemum carruthersii var. ***carruthersii*** "Reticulatum" (eldorado):

An easy to grow shrub with golden or limegreen leaves and spikes of white flowers, each with a pink centre. This is a good example of a foliage plant that also has conspicuous blooms. Plant in sun or light shade.



Ctenanthe oppenheimiana (never-never plant):

One of the many clump-forming perennials with attractive foliage, this is a most useful plant for growing in deep shade. The reverse of each leaf is rosy red, while the upper surface is grey-green with silver stripes. During the heat of the day the leaves curl to reduce transpiration, creating a two-tone effect. The flowers are inconspicuous.



Maranta leuconeura **var. *erythroneura*** (prayer plant):

Mostly grown as a houseplant, this low-growing perennial has broad, stubby leaves with an intricate red pattern on the upper surface. The backs of the leaves are also reddish in hue. During the hours of darkness the leaves roll up, giving rise to the common name.



Canna x generalis hybrids (canna lily):

This clump-forming, tuberous perennial is very easy to grow in almost any climate, including the coldest parts of the country. During summer and autumn the prettily variegated leaves make a conspicuous display in sun or dappled shade. This is a good plant for filling up gaps in herbaceous borders. Prune back to ground level in winter, after which new growth will emerge in spring.



Ipomoea batatas hybrids (sweetpotato):

A whole range of these ornamental sweet potatoes has recently arrived on the market. They grow rapidly into wide-spreading vines, hugging the ground or cascading over walls. Leaf shapes, sizes and colours vary. They are ideal for pots, window boxes and hanging baskets, and look their best in the heat of summer and autumn. Grow them in dappled shade for the best results.