

Drama in the Garden



Photos: Abyssinian banana by Plant Delights Nursery

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Everybody wants to know what makes a garden design really click. You know, the ones where you walk through and some small vista transports you to another place, perhaps a moment in childhood, or one that calms your soul and makes you take a long, deep, easy breath. The heart of these gardens is good dramatic design. Much like going to a good movie or play, it's usually a few key items in the set design that send you off to the hot tropics of Borneo or down to Old Mexico. This holds true in the garden as well. A few well-placed dramatic plants can set the entire mood of the garden.

I'm personally completely enamored by the tropical garden at this point. The true drama queens of the tropical garden are bananas, taro, and the hot bright colors of the New Guinea impatiens. One of my favorites is the red Abyssinian banana (*Ensete ventricosum* Maurelii). It has a big bold form and is beautifully colored with burgundy red. Another favorite is Portadora taro (*Alocasia portadora*), a massive grower to eight feet with ripple-edged leaves, often two feet across. It rarely suckers, so it is not invasive like some other taros. A new find for me is the Harmony series of New Guinea Impatiens, wildly variegated with bronze-black and sunset-orange leaf combinations.

But let's say you pine for that South of the Border flair in your garden, with a more southwestern style. There is nothing like a well-grown agave (*Agavaceae*), a patch of prickly-pear cactus (*Opuntia*), or yucca to set the mood. All do extremely well even in our usually moist climate. If it doesn't start raining soon, we all might have to consider this arid southwestern look more seriously!

Don't like the thorns, but love the look? Consider trying Bright-Edge yucca (*Yucca filamentosa*) or Silver Star yucca (*Yucca elephantipes*). Both are green, boldly striped with gold or white. True show-stoppers! Or what

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about smooth-leaf opuntia, with its ghostly blue-green smooth pads? A perfect silhouette plant. All great alternatives, and not an “ouch” among them.

So whether you have a small one-reel wonder garden or a big production on your hands, have some fun and put some drama into it to set the mood.

Question of the Week by Daniel Mullins, UF-IFAS Santa Rosa County Extension: I have a small shady area near my back door that would benefit from some color. What do you recommend?

Answer: Caladiums perform well in small shady spots. Local nurseries and garden centers are usually well stocked with caladium bulbs (actually tubers) during April. You will find bulbs in various sizes. Choose the larger bulbs if cost is not a serious issue. They will provide full sized leaves sooner than the smaller bulbs. Prepare the soil by adding and incorporating a generous amount of an organic amendment such as peat, manure or compost. Plant them with the bud side up at a depth of one to two inches.



Bright Edge yucca by Decora Buzet.

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