

Elephant Ears...

Perhaps the Right Place for Them is on the
Head of an Elephant!

By Nancy Porter, Master Gardener Volunteer

“Elephant ears” (or variously called “elephant’s ears”) are tropical-looking plants in varying sizes and shapes. Many turn into towering giants and provide beautiful focal points in a garden. Others can cover large areas and provide a jungle ambience to the surroundings. However, BEFORE you plant, do your research.

True wild taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) is an invasive plant and should under no circumstances be put in the landscape. It is a very aggressive weed, will displace native plants and cause disruption in the lifecycle of native wildlife. Another commonly named “elephant ear” – the arrowleaf (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*) - is also considered an invasive or problem plant. As always, if you are unsure whether the plant you have is invasive, take a photo or a sample to the Master Gardener Volunteers at your local UF/IFAS Extension office.

On the other hand, giant taro (*Alocasia macrorrhizos*) is one of the many *Alocasias* that are safe to plant. Another good choice is a cultivar called ‘Hilo Beauty’. It has a pattern like camouflage with light yellow and green markings supported by bluish-black stems. It does well in warm and moist conditions. A decorative patio pot is a great place for it to thrive. It will also do well outside in your garden and will grow to a relatively large size.

Given the wide choice of *Alocasias*, you can select for full sun to full shade. They will die back in colder weather, but will resprout when the weather warms up. Avoid planting *Alocasias* in or near natural waterways where they can become problems.

All “elephant ears” mentioned above are in the caladium family, so shop for *Alocasias* where you buy caladiums.

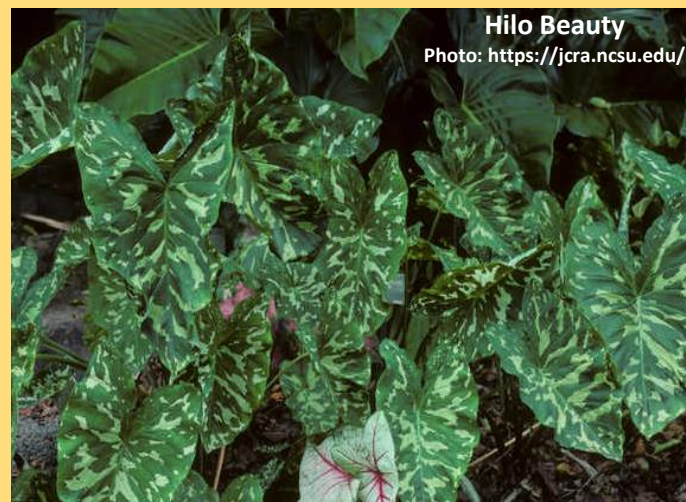
For more information: <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fp033>,

<https://gardeningolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/ornamentals/elephant-ears.html> or

<https://assessment.ifas.ufl.edu/>.



Bad-Guy Wild Taro
Photo: UF Assessment



Hilo Beauty
Photo: <https://jcra.ncsu.edu/>



Giant Taro
Photo: UF Assessment



Manatee County Agriculture and Extension Service

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Send a photo or gardening problem via e-mail to the Master Gardener Volunteers at ManateeMG@gmail.com or visit them at the County Extension Office Monday – Friday 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.; closed on Wednesday



GET A
GOOD
THING
GROWING!

ASK A MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER

Q: There are about 100 of these on my avocado tree and they've eaten half the leaves off the tree. What are they and how do I get rid of them?

B. R.



A: This is *Lepidoptera psychidae*, common name is Abbot's bagworm. This is the largest bagworm species in Florida. It is very polyphagous, feeding on the leaves of a wide variety of trees and shrubs, including both hardwoods and conifers.

Usually bagworms are not numerous, but it sounds like you had enough to get some defoliation. Contact insecticides likely wouldn't work well since the caterpillars live in a protective case. But an insecticide containing Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) should be effective against the feeding caterpillars and be safe for fruit trees. Bt works best against caterpillars when they are small. Brand names of Bt include "Thurcide" and "Dipel."

The following link is to information about *Oiketicus abbotii*, the moth responsible for the caterpillar.

<https://bugguide.net/node/view/42338>

Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer in Your Community

We are excited to be expanding our off-site locations to serve your needs. At the present time, we have "mobile plant clinics" at several locations throughout the county in addition to our Plant Clinic at the University of Florida/IFAS Manatee County Extension office.

New off-site options:

- Lakewood Ranch Farmers' Market (8330 Lakewood Ranch Blvd.) First and third Sunday of the month 10AM – 2PM
- St. George's Episcopal Church (912 63rd Ave. W., Bradenton.) First and third Thursday of the month 9AM – 12PM
- Christ Episcopal Church (4030 Manatee Ave. W., Bradenton.) First and third Saturdays of the month 10AM – 2PM near the Thrift Shop.

We are open to your suggestions on sites for further "mobile plant clinics." Regrettably, county libraries and some farmers' markets (some of our usual pre-COVID venues) are currently closed to us. Stay in touch with [The Garden Bench](#) calendar of events for updates.

Extension office options:

- In person visits at Extension (1303 17th St. W., Palmetto.) Every weekday except Wednesday, 9AM – 4PM
- Call us at the hours listed above (941) 722-4524, ext. 1819 or 1820
- Email us at ManateeMG@gmail.com
- Submit requests through our online request [form](#).

Master Gardener Volunteer Karen Holleran
answers your email questions.

Send questions and/or photos for identification or for
diagnosis of residential gardening problems to
ManateeMG@gmail.com.

Or call us during office hours 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. at
941-722-4524 and ask for a Master Gardener Volunteer.



“Natives” That Aren’t Native

By Amy L. Stripe, Master Gardener Volunteer

My favorite botanist is Marc Frank of the University of Florida’s Herbarium. He often clarifies the muddy waters of plant classification for me. Admittedly, as botanists fine-tune classifications, us “end-users” (home gardeners) are sometimes in for nasty surprises. It’s all for the good in the end, but here are a few examples of so-called native plants I’ve planted in my own landscape that have turned out to be not really native.

Whilst reading the information below, keep in mind that the terms “variety” and “subspecies” refer to naturally occurring cross pollination, whereas “cultivar” means a manmade “cultivated variety.” By the way, “naturally occurring” does not equate to “native.”

Necklace Pod (*Sophora tomentosa*):



To quote Marc: “The exact range of *S. tomentosa* is obscure, but is so widely distributed that multiple varieties or subspecies have been described (by botanists) over the years.” Only one, *S. tomentosa* var. *truncata* is native to Florida. A cultivar, *S. tomentosa* var. *occidentalis* is widely sold in Florida but is not the native. The native plant’s leaves are hairless when mature. The imposter’s leaves have dense pubescence (lots of short hairs.)

The non-native necklace pods in my landscape have been repeatedly subjected to the ravages of the sophora moth worm (*Uresiphita reversalis*) in recent years. I could find no information available if this is exclusive to the native or non-native species of *Sophora*.

General information at:

<http://hort.ufl.edu/shrubs/SOPTOMA.PDF>

Firebush (*Hamelia patens*):



Continued on page 4

Marc admits lots of molecular analysis is needed on this plant and its many cultivars and varieties. As I currently understand it, the most commonly sold versions are *H. patens* var *patens*, the “true” native, and *H. patens* var *glabra*, a non-native. The former sports redder leaf edges and flowers and larger leaves, whereas the latter has orangey-reddish flowers and smaller leaves.

As I have both in my yard, I suspect they have cross-pollinated several times over to create a mystery species. Marc tells me this is possible, something called a “complex or hybrid swarm” in which interbreeding occurs between hybrids and species.

General information at:

<http://hort.ufl.edu/shrubs/SOPTOMA.PDF>

Blue Porterweed (*Strachytarpheta* spp.):



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UF

This delightful groundcover comes in two commonly sold species: *S. jamaicensis* (the alleged native) and *S. cayennensis*. The latter is a “caution” invasive plant in Florida and is distinguished from the native in that it has a much wider leaf and gets somewhat taller. A third version is *S. urticifolia*, which becomes more of an upright shrub than the former two.

In any case, be super cautious with porterweeds; they spread quickly in damp, warm summer months. The non-natives will be with you for your lifetime.

For information, visit:

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fp559>.

When buying native plants, be sure to drill down to the scientific names. Familiarize yourself with differences between the natives and non-natives.

The benefits to buying native over non-natives involves drought and pest resistance, cold hardiness, wildlife habitat, and generally speaking, the maintenance involved.

MASTER GARDENER PLANT SALE

Visit the Barbara Davis Educational Gardens!
Buy plants!
Native plants-Florida friendly-orchids-bromeliads-vegetables-herbs-pollinator plants and more!
All plants raised by Master Gardener Volunteers!

Saturday, March 20 ~ 8:00 A.M.-3:00 P.M.
1303 17th St. West Palmetto, FL 34221

Tickets required. Sign up on Eventbrite and pick a one-hour time slot (beginning 8:00-9:00AM). A limit of 50 tickets per hour time slot will be issued.
https://2021_plant_sale.eventbrite.com

Masks Required
Physical Distancing Enforced



The Iridescent Mangrove Skipper

By Jim Haupt, Master Gardener Volunteer

Recently, a mangrove skipper was found and identified near the Manatee County Extension office. Unfortunately, it was no longer alive, but since I rarely see one, I wanted to learn more about them.

Like all skippers, the mangrove skipper belongs to the family *Hesperiidae*. There are six subspecies of mangrove skippers; the Florida variety, *Phocides Pigmalion okeechobee*, does not migrate but remains in Florida throughout the year. Florida's variety can be seen as far north as Volusia County on the Atlantic coast, and a bit north of Pinellas County on the Gulf coast, and southward to the Keys.

Like most skippers, the mangrove skipper has antennae crowned with knobs that resemble hooks. Yet unlike most skippers, it is larger, possessing super-active wing movements and flight patterns. Aptly named, the mangrove skipper is easily recognized as it skips from place to place and flower to flower. Adorned by a matted, dull brown body, the mangrove skipper is graced with sparkling iridescent electric blue dots and stripes that stand out like a neon sign!

Its connection with red mangroves (*Rhizophora mangle*) is vital since it's the *only* plant the mangrove skipper depends on as its larval host. It is this relational tie that limits where it lives. Mostly seen in coastal saltwater habitats, mangrove skippers are spotted perched upside down on the underside of leaves and stems with wings fanned out as if posing for a photograph. Females lay single eggs on the underside of a leaf. Newly hatched,

the caterpillar builds its shelter by cutting slits in a leaf creating a flap that drapes over its body. It excretes a thick layer of silk to seal the flap in place. Snuggled safely inside, it feasts on the curled red mangrove leaf until it transforms into the next stage of life.

Once transformed into an adult, they skip, skirt, and dart about seeking nectar. Feeding predominantly on white flowers of red mangroves, they also sip the sugary substance from bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea spp*), native lantana (*Lantana involucrate*), Spanish needle (*Bidens alba*), and citrus.

According to the University of Florida/IFAS, "condominiums and coastal communities are in excellent locations to attract mangrove skippers. Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Principle #5 highlights the importance of landscaping to attract wildlife: "Butterflies often are considered a flagship of environmental health". UF/IFAS encourages people to get in touch with their natural surroundings. Many homes have red mangroves nearby and you can install the nectar source plants described.

As a sidenote, the black mangrove (*Aveicanna germinans*) is the host for the mangrove buckeye (*Junonia genoveva*), a butterfly that lay its eggs on the finger-like breathing roots (pneumatophores) that protrude from the ground.

Visit: <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/EP/EP42000.pdf> or <http://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/manateeco/2019/06/14/mysterious-mangroves/>.



Spring Vegetable Gardening

By Maureen Hirthler, Master Gardener Volunteer

As our northern friends brace for the worst part of winter, here in Florida it's time to begin planning our spring vegetable gardens! Our winter, with an occasional frost, is ending, and we need to get ready to beat the heat of summer.

The great news is that you can plant almost everything, as long as it sets fruit before temperatures rise into the 80's. Every month, the University of Florida posts a graphic of what to plant by month, so check that out at [Gardening Solutions](https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/plant-of-the-month/monthly-infographic.html). (<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/plant-of-the-month/monthly-infographic.html>)

The University has an excellent publication found [HERE](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021) with all the information you'll need to get started on a vegetable garden. (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021>)

For those of us who grow from seed, now is the time to start. We need hardy plants if we're going to plant in March. IFAS publication [ep486](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep486) (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep486>) has all the information, and our October 2020 [Garden Bench](#) has an in-depth article, too! Pick the healthiest seedlings to plant in your garden. (Locate back issues of the newsletter at <https://tinyurl.com/nc9h3k8s>).

Each seed packet provides "date to harvest." Remember, we're trying to avoid the summer, so look for early fruiting varieties, ideally <70 days. A little math tells you the latest date by which you want to put in young plants. Some seeds can be direct planted, too, but you may be a bit behind the harvest date. If you purchase transplants, check the harvest date, too. Because they are usually very well established, they will have a shorter time to harvest, and you can plant them later.

Some examples of early fruiting tomato varieties are Celebrity (65 days), Early Girl (50 days). You can also still grow some lettuces and herbs outdoors before temperatures rise above 80.

You can prepare your garden, raised beds or self-watering containers right now and information is [HERE](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep472). (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep472>) It's a great time to have your soil tested for pH and salts at our office and add amendments as needed. Vegetables like a pH of 6-7 and EDIS publication [SL 256](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/SS/SS48000.pdf) (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/SS/SS48000.pdf>) is very helpful in achieving this.

Now the fun begins! In mid to late March, begin planting, following the directions on the seed packet for depth and spacing. Water gently until the plant gets established, then water and feed as advised.

Vegetables need more water and food than you might expect! *Gardening Solutions* offers information on choosing and applying fertilizer [HERE](https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/care/fertilizer/) (<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/care/fertilizer/>).

Inspect daily for pests, and treat using [Integrated Pest Management](https://tinyurl.com/b6esm6ei). (<https://tinyurl.com/b6esm6ei>) Advice on staking, pruning, and protecting your garden from critters can also be found at [UF/ IFAS Gardening Solutions](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/SS48000.pdf). ([Gardening Solutions - University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences \(ufl.edu\)](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/SS48000.pdf)).

As you can see, we have all the information you might need to be successful right at your fingertips, and we're open at the Plant Clinic at Manatee County Extension office, too.

Good luck. By following these tips, you should have wonderful veggies in a few months.



GROWING SUGARCANE

Text and Photos by John Dawson, Master Gardener Volunteer

This past year, I tried growing sugarcane. Sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) is a tropical perennial grass that thrives in humid environments across the southern United States. There are three types of sugarcane.

- Chewing canes ('Yellow Gal,' 'Georgia Red' varieties) and are soft, with sweet (derived from sucrose) fibers that stick together when chewed. Many of these are also used for syrup production.
- Crystal canes contain a lot of sucrose and are used to make granular sugar.
- Syrup canes ('Louisiana Ribbon,' 'Green German' varieties) contain less sucrose, therefore less crystallization, making them more suitable for syrup.

Sugarcane can be propagated by seed or from sections of plant stalk. Mature cane stalks have nodes, about every six inches that produce buds (the canes look like bamboo). Commercially, mature stalks are cut into two to three-foot segments and then planted three to seven inches deep and three feet apart in long rows. New canes sprout from the buds of the old stalks which appear at the nodes, through a process known as "ratooning."

It takes about 12 to 14 months to produce mature cane from a ratoon. I bought a six-foot mature cane at a local farmers' market and divided it into four sections, cutting just above a node. I soaked them overnight in water and then wrapped them in moist newspaper and placed them in a plastic bag. I placed the bag on a shelf indoors and checked the ratoons after two weeks.

Buds had formed at each node with many hairy roots. I then prepared an up-cycled blue recycling bin by drilling several more drainage holes in the bottom and filling it with garden soil. I planted the ratoons three inches deep lying flat into the planting bin and placed it in full sun. If you decide to plant in the ground, be sure to place the ratoons about three feet apart in a sunny well drained area.

About ten days later, cane sprouts began to appear. I was chewing cane within a year. Just peel off the outer bark and cut the inner section into strips.

Lessons learned:

- 1) Always wear gloves when handling sugarcane leaves as they are very sharp and leave coarse hairs that are difficult to remove and itch like crazy.
- 2) When the canes get about two feet high, high winds may knock the bin over, so try to adjust the bin placement parallel to prevailing winds. (If planted in the ground, sugarcane makes a good windbreak.)
- 3) It takes a lot of patience, equipment, and sugarcane to make cane syrup, the staple sweetener of early Florida settlers. Sugarcane is processed by cutting the canes and crushing them in a press extracting the sugar water. The sugar water is then cooked down in an evaporator pan until only syrup is left. This may take eight hours or more with constant skimming of plant debris. A stand of sugarcane twenty feet long by ten feet wide might produce one gallon of syrup.

Relics of horse/mule crushers and evaporating pans can be seen at Manatee Village and at the Farm Museum in Palmetto. For more information on growing sugarcane in Florida, go to <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/IR00003414/00001>.

Mature cane stalks look like bamboo.



March

CALENDAR OF EVENTS



Date	Time	Event
1 st & 3 rd Sunday of the month	10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.	Master Gardener Mobile Plant Clinic at Lakewood Ranch Farmer's Market (8330 Lakewood Ranch Blvd.) Visit the Master Gardener Volunteers who are available to share their knowledge on horticulture and assist community residents with horticulture questions.
1 st & 3 rd Thursday of the month	9:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.	Master Gardener Mobile Plant Clinic at St. George's Episcopal Church (912 63rd Ave. West, Bradenton) Come visit the Master Gardener Volunteers who are available to share their knowledge on horticulture and assist community residents with horticulture questions.
1 st & 3 rd Saturday of the month	10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.	Master Gardener Mobile Plant Clinic at Christ Episcopal Church (4030 Manatee Ave. West, Bradenton) Visit the Master Gardener Volunteers who are available to share their knowledge on horticulture and assist community residents with horticulture questions.
Saturday March 13	9:00-11:00 a.m.	Extension Master Gardener Nature and Plant ID Tour - Riverview Pointe Preserve – DeSoto National Memorial – Stroll through Riverview Pointe Preserve to learn more about Florida's native plants and inhabitants of a coastal habitat. Suitable for all ages. The hike begins in the parking area of the DeSoto National Memorial Park and enters into the Riverview Preserve at 8250 DeSoto Memorial Highway, Bradenton. Register Here or https://riverview_pointe_preserve.eventbrite.com
Saturday March 13	9:00-11:00 a.m.	Extension Master Gardener Nature and Plant ID Tour – Emerson Point Preserve - Stroll through Emerson Point Preserve to learn more about Florida's native plants and inhabitants of a coastal habitat. Suitable for all ages. Register Here or https://emerson_preserve.eventbrite.com
Wednesdays March 17 March 24 March 31 April 7 April 14 April 21	4:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.	Nature Journaling Webinar Series - Join UF/IFAS Extension Manatee County's Residential Horticulture Agent and Manatee County Public Libraries for a series of webinars on Nature Journaling. We will cover; Getting Started, Health Benefits, Plant, Tree and Mushroom ID techniques. In celebration of National Poetry Month, the last class will focus on the influence of plants and nature on poetry. Register once and attend any of the six webinar classes. Register here or https://ufl.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_HEZKX8g6T4SjZHnupxyIEQ
Saturday March 20	8:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.	2021 Master Gardener Volunteer Spring Plant Sale Native plants, Florida-Friendly orchids, bromeliads, vegetables, herbs, pollinator plants and more! All plants raised by Master Gardener Volunteers. Tickets required, sign up on Eventbrite and pick a one-hour time slot. A limit of 50 tickets per hour time slot. https://2021_plant_sale.eventbrite.com . Masks required.
Saturday March 20	9:00-11:00 a.m.	Extension Master Gardener Nature and Plant ID Tour – Rye Preserve - Take a hike through upland habitats along Rye Branch and learn about Florida native plants, natural history, and early settlement of the area. Drinking water, sturdy shoes, and hiking sticks are recommended. Register Here or https://rye_preserve.eventbrite.com
Wednesday March 24	10:30-11:30 a.m.	Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Right Plant Right Place Zoom Webinar – Right Plant, Right Place is the first principle of Florida-Friendly Landscaping™. Take a deep dive into all the factors that go into planning your well-designed landscape and truly putting the right plant in the right place based on your site conditions. Register here or https://ufl.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_r9KN17sSRP2TbevwkFFh4g
Saturday March 27	9:00-11:00 a.m.	Extension Master Gardener Nature and Plant ID Tour – Perico Preserve – Explore one of Manatee County's newest preserves and learn about Florida's native plants, how they benefit wildlife, and how they can be used in the home landscape. Learn about the wide variety of ecosystems on display and how the preserve was transformed into what it is today. Suitable for all ages. Click here to register or https://perico_preserve.eventbrite.com



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