

# fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

## Nothing creates that trendy look like tropical foliage.

WHERE WOULD FLORAL DESIGNERS be without tropical foliage? When it's time to line a clear glass vase, collar a hand-tied bouquet, enfold or shelter precious blooms, or add intriguing accents in all kinds of rolled and gently curving shapes, the broad, hardy leaves of exotic plants serve as a mainstay.

Most species and varieties are available year-round from a wide range of sources, from South America to the Far East. Some are grown in Florida. Nearly all the major tropical foliage can be sourced from Hawaii, where the volcanic mountains offer a range of microclimates. "Most of the tropical plants we harvest for cut foliage like it cool, 70 to 80 degrees, with lots of rainfall, and good sunshine but not high UV," says Eric Tanouye of Green Point Nurseries in Hilo, Hawaii. "Here in Hawaii we have the sunlight and the cloud cover to protect against it. Foliage flourishes in this type of environment. If necessary, in summer or at elevations where the sunlight is more intense, we'll shade the crop."

Hawaii's foliage crops are growing ever more diverse as new products are introduced. Eric describes the industry at this time as dynamic and on the move: "We have a lot of younger people coming into established, family businesses and shaking things up." Hawaiian foliage growers have recently united with cut-flower growers under the umbrella of a new organization, the Hawaii Floriculture and Nursery Association. The diversity of both flowers and foliage from Hawaii is being promoted in the *Neotropica* guide, which includes suggested palettes for showcasing these products and combining them with temperate flowers.

What follows is a mini-guide to just a few of the more popular tropical cut foliage available from Hawaii and around the world.



**Alocasia**  
(African mask)  
*Alocasia* spp

The striking contrast of alocasia's light-colored leaf veins with the dark green interveinal area provides a vivid visual display. Leaves are typically 6 to 8

to 18 inches long. Alocasias are sometimes mistaken for philodendrons, but are typically not as thick in leaf structure and not as durable. Shown is *Alocasia x amazonica* 'White Knight'.

**Vase life:** 3-5 days

**Purchasing hints:** Leaves and stems should not be wilted or have curled edges.

**Care and handling:** Type 2



**Anthurium**  
*Anthurium* spp

Anthurium cut foliage often comes from the same species (*Anthurium andreanum*) as the cut flowers. The large arrowhead-shaped leaves are leathery and shiny. Leaves are usually

graded as small (8-10 inches), medium (10-12 inches), and large (12+ inches). Shown is *A. warocqueanum*.

**Vase life:** 7-14 days

**Purchasing hints:** Note that the stems are not cracked just below where the stem joins the leaf.

**Care and handling:** Type 1



**Aspidistra**  
*Aspidistra elatior*

One of the most durable broad, flat-leaved species, aspidistra is available in both solid green and in green and white variegated varieties (notably, the aptly named 'Milky Way' aspidistra,

with white flecks like stars). The green variety is sometimes confused with green ti leaves, but aspidistra leaves are always asymmetrical, i.e., the primary vein is not in the middle of the leaf, and unlike ti, aspidistra leaves have a 6- to 8-inch stem.

**Vase life:** 14-21 days

**Purchasing hints:** Look at interior leaves of bundles for signs of botrytis or black spots on leaves.

**Care and handling:** Type 1



**Calathea**  
(peacock plant)  
*Calathea* spp

The actual color and pattern of the leaf variegation varies widely from cultivar to cultivar. From thin pink stripes to large maroon blotches, there is almost

certainly a color and style to fit most occasions. Leaves are 3-7 inches wide and 6-12 inches long. Shown: *Calathea makoyana*.

**Vase life:** 14-21 days

**Purchasing hints:** Watch for leaf edges that are brown or curled.

**Care and handling:** Type 1



**Curculigo**  
(whaleback, palm grass)  
*Curculigo capitulata*

Whaleback's pleated-looking leaves have a three-dimensional quality unique to most cut foliage. Leaves average 15-18 inches long and 3-6 inches wide with a 2-4 inch stem.

**Vase life:** 10-14 days

**Purchasing hints:** Avoid leaf tips that are broken, brown or shredded.

**Care and handling:** Type 1



**Cycas (sago palm)**  
*Cycas circinalis*, *C. revoluta*

Cycas is not a true palm, but is rather a tropical gymnosperm cousin to pines, spruces and other conifers. The stiff leaves are 4-8 inches wide and may be up to 3 feet long and available as small, medium, or large lengths. Shown: *Cycas circinalis* (Queen Sago).

**Vase life:** 21-30 days

**Purchasing hints:** Avoid stems with the tips of the leaflets brown or dehydrated.

**Care and handling:** Type 1



**Cyperus**  
(papyrus, lion's tail, hair grass)  
*Cyperus papyrus*

The long straight stems (24-40 inches) are offset by the tuft of soft green grass-like foliage at the top. The tufts are typically 3-7 inches in diameter and can be trimmed to create a more sculptured appearance.

**Vase life:** 7-10 days

**Purchasing hints:** The tips of the tufts are prone to dehydration, so double-check that they are fresh and blemish free.

**Care and handling:** Type 2



**Cyperus (umbrella grass)**  
*Cyperus alternifolius*, *C. involucratus*

The leaves of this plant radiate outward atop the stem, resembling the ribs of an umbrella. Stem length varies considerably, but is typically 18-30 inches.

**Vase life:** 7-10 days

**Purchasing hints:** Be sure that the stems are not bent nor the leaves dehydrated.

**Care and handling:** Type 2

Photos used to illustrate this article were taken from *Neotropica*, the useful and stylish guide to tropical flowers and plants from Hawaii, published by Design358. The guide, authored by Hitomi Gilliam AIFD and Lois Hiranaga AIFD, offers both product information and design inspiration. To learn more, visit [www.design358.com](http://www.design358.com).

### Care and handling for tropical foliage: Type 1

- Unpack foliage immediately upon arrival.
- Remove one-half to one inch from stem end using a sharp knife or shears. Place in tepid floral food solution and condition at room temperature for one to two hours or overnight.
- Store in a 50 degree F high-humidity cooler.

### Care and handling for tropical foliage: Type 2

- Same as for Type 1, except that product requires high humidity. It should be conditioned for one to two hours only. Then, after conditioning and before storing:
- Mist heavily and cover with clear plastic to maintain very high humidity.

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## **Dracaena** **Dracaena spp**

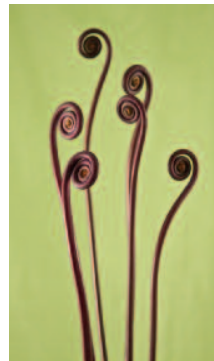
A hugely diverse genus, dracaenas are available in wide selection of colors and shapes, from single green leaves resembling flax to semi-woody stems with a pink and green rosette on top.

Individual leaves are typically 1-2 inches wide by 18-24 inches long, while stems of dracaena range from 18 inches to 36 inches. Shown: a stalk of *D. deremensis* 'Warneckii'.

**Vase life:** 14-21 days

**Purchasing hints:** Dracaenas are sensitive to fluoride, chlorine, and other water impurities that cause leaf-tip browning. Inspect leaf tips and avoid stems showing any sign of browning.

**Care and handling:** Type 1



## **Fern curls** **Dicranopteris linearis, Cibotium glaucum**

Fern curls are the undeveloped stems of certain species of ferns and may be referred to as fiddleheads. These fiddleheads range in size from 1 inch up to 6

inches in diameter on stems that are 18-30 inches long. Some fern curls are fuzzy while others are smooth and shiny. The smaller fern curls seen here are *Dicranopteris linearis*, known as uluhe fern curls; a large "kakuma" fern curl (*Cibotium glaucum*) is pictured on page 8.

**Vase life:** 10-14 days

**Purchasing hints:** Stems should be straight to slightly arched and the fiddleheads (coils) should not be wilted or limp from dehydration.

**Care and handling:** Type 2



## **Monstera** **(split-leaf philodendron)** **Monstera deliciosa**

Monstera is a tough, durable leaf with a leathery texture.

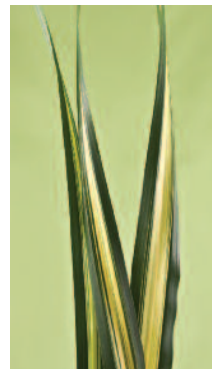
Leaves are available in small, medium and large sizes (8-24 inches in diameter) with growers

determining the size for each grade. Mostly available in solid green, a variegated cultivar is also now available in limited quantities. Sometimes confused with philodendron, monstera has thick leathery leaves with somewhat sickle-shaped serrations.

**Vase life:** 18-30 days

**Purchasing hints:** Look for stems that have not been broken at the attachment point to the large leaf.

**Care and handling:** Type 1



## **Pandanus (hala)** **Pandanus tectorius, P. baptistii**

Hala is the leaf of a large tropical tree. Available in both a solid green and in green and yellow variegated cultivars, leaves are typically 20-30 inches long and about 1-1 1/2

inches wide. The long narrow leaves may be used as a substitute for flax. Shown: variegated *Pandanus baptistii*.

**Vase life:** 14-21 days

**Purchasing hints:** Check to make sure the leaf tips are not damaged or dehydrated.

**Care and handling:** Type 1



## **Philodendron** **Philodendron spp**

Philodendrons are available in a large variety of shapes and sizes. Some cultivars have solid, flat leaves while others have large serrations or irregular edges. Leaves of

smaller cultivars are 4-6 inches in diameter while larger cultivars can exceed 18 inches in diameter. Leaf color may be solid green or variegated green and white, red and bronze or pink and red. 'Xanadu' is a popular solid-green variety.

**Vase life:** 10-14 days

**Purchasing hints:** Be sure the leaves are blemish free and pay particular attention to leaves on the interior of bunches.

**Care and handling:** Type 1



## **Strelitzia** **(bird of paradise)** **Strelitzia reginae**

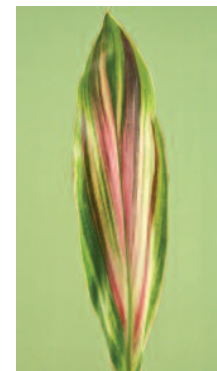
Large, sword-shaped leaves (12-24 inches long) sit atop 18- to 24-inch stems. The stems are very stiff and rigid. Leaves may be dried by hanging them upside down

so they will contort into interesting shapes as they dry. Bird-of-paradise cut foliage comes from the same species as the cut flowers.

**Vase life:** 7-14 days

**Purchasing hints:** Make sure leaves have not split during shipping.

**Care and handling:** Type 2



## **Ti leaves** **Cordyline fruticosa** **(syn C. terminalis)**

A large, lanceolate (lance-shaped) leaf with a heavy midrib. Overall size varies by cultivar but averages 15-18 inches long and 3-6 inches wide. Colors also vary, but the most

common are solid green, variegated pink and red, and variegated red and green. The variegated cultivars are typically smaller than the solid green cultivars.

**Vase life:** 10-14 days

**Purchasing hints:** Leaf tips and edges should be free from browning or yellowing and overall surface should be glossy.

**Care and handling:** Type 1, or may be stored flat, out of water and covered with clear plastic, for 1-2 days without loss of vase life. 🌿