

# FOLIAGE POWER - ALL THESE LEAF COLORS, SHAPES AND TEXTURES

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Foliage plants have traditionally been prized for their attractive leaves. A remarkable variety of leaf sizes, shapes, textures, and colors have excited the fancy of plant lovers since the Victorian era. Most [DBM1] Spathiphyllum, Anthurium, Aphelandra, and bromeliad species and cultivars are valued for their flowers as well as their foliage. Indeed, these plants

are usually sold only when in flower. We spend about 85% of our time indoors and foliage plants provide color and life in these surroundings. Most foliage plants originated in tropical and subtropical areas of the world. Therefore, they are well adapted to thrive in environments where the temperatures and light levels are similar to their natural environment, i.e., our residential and public buildings. They bring nature inside our homes and help us nurture the link to the living green world. No home or shopping mall is complete without at least a solitary palm in the corner, and even better, a mass planting of foliage plants. In addition, foliage plants make wonderful gifts and blend very well with traditional flowering potted crops such as African violets, Gloxinias, and many others. Small-size foliage plants planted in coordinated groupings present delightful displays in dish gardens. They are especially appealing to customers seeking an instant garden for a tabletop display.

In Georgia, we have greenhouse operations, which grow foliage plants for sales during late June, July, and August. This supplements their summer production and allows them to extend sales into the summer. In addition, growers buy finished plants from Florida and resale them locally at retail florist stores. Dish gardens and larger combination plantings in decorative ceramic planters (8" to 24") for the upscale Atlanta market are also popular.

Today, numerous species and cultivars of foliage plants are available, and new ones are introduced every year. Foliage plant breeders have focused their efforts on improving plant appearance and performance in the interior environment. Qualities such as tolerance to low light levels and low temperatures, repeat flowering, and increased disease resistance are used as selection criteria for many of the new cultivars introduced each year. Here is a list of some new introductions in the foliage plant world and the companies that developed them.

## From Agri-Starts:

**Chlorophytum orchidanthroides 'Fire Flash'** is an exciting new species of Chlorophytum for the foliage trade. It is characterized by wide, ovate, lanceolate leaves and coral midveins. The glossy-green leaves have distinct parallel veins and a bright-coral petiole. Flowers are white in a dense cylindrical panicle partway hidden in the foliage. Suited for 6" foliage and landscape, and 8-10" hanging basket.

**Colocasia 'Nancy's Revenge'** features elephant ear shaped leaves measuring 2 ft wide by 3 ft long. The central white midvein with

white trailing into the leaf blade is striking. It is a colorful new landscape plant.

**Syngonium podophyllum 'Neon'** has bright, hot-pink foliage. It is a self-branching or self-heading variety, suited for 4," 6", 8" bulb pan, and 8-10" hanging basket. Perfect in assortments or combination dish garden.

**Spathiphyllum 'Ceres' 'Hi Ho Silver'** is a variant of 'Ceres' - the European variety that blooms with a symmetrical shape. This beautiful new cultivar looks like a gray-green Aglaonema. Suited for 4," 6", 8", and 10" pots.

## From Oglesby:

**Polypodium 'Green Wave'** is characterized by heavy rhizomal growth; this fern grows as vigorously as a Nephrolepis and produces a full pot of fronds. The distinctive wavering fronds are dark green and they grow upright. The foliage is dark green and tough. Suited for 6", 8 and 10" pot production.

**Spathiphyllum 'Sensation Mini'** features foliage similar to that of **Spathiphyllum 'Sensation'**. Leaves are darker green, more ovate and less elongated, very glossy and retain the distinctive ribbing of 'Sensation'. Petioles and internodes are shorter and tighter, resulting in a symmetrical appearance and a columnar rather than spreading shape. Although with larger leaves, 'Sensation Mini' fits well in 6" pots as well as 8" and 10" pots.

**Spathiphyllum 'Sweet Pablo'** is a very fast grower with consistent flowering from crop to crop. Plants break freely providing a full uniform crop. Foliage is characterized by a subtle light-veined midrib. During production it requires higher fertilizer levels than other Spath cultivars. Suited for 6", 8 and 10" pot production.

**Spathiphyllum 'Flower Power'** has large flowers, borne well above the foliage, on strong upright stems. The foliage fills the pot with distinctive lanceolate leaves. Suited for 6", 8 and 10" pot production.

**Spathiphyllum 'Sonya'** flowers early with a strong natural branching habit. The flowers have a distinctive twist on the spathe apex. The leaves are narrow when young and become broader with maturity. Suited for 6", 8 and 10" pot production.

## From Twyford:

**Calathea 'Silver Plate'** has silver-green, glossy foliage and long-lasting pink flowers. One of the few flowering calatheas in culture. Suited for 6", 8", 10", and 14" pot production.

**Homalomena 'Purple Sword'** is characterized by dark-green and silver-marked leaves with contrasting dark purple on the undersides. Leaf petioles are also purple. Fast-growing cultivar that suckers well. Suited for 4", 6", 8 and 10" pot production.

**Anthurium 'Tropic Fire'** features bright fiery-red spathe and white spadix. Produces a full pot of rich, medium green, shiny foliage. Suited for 6", 8 and 10" pot production.

**Carludovica 'Jungle Drums'** is a new plant species for the foliage trade. It is stemless with rounded, fan-shaped rich green leaves usually cut in two parts. They resemble palm leaves but are much softer in texture. Suited for 6 and 8" pot production.

*Aglaonema* 'Red Gold' features green and yellow speckled leaves with very characteristic and unusual pink petioles. It produces a full pot and shows potential for good indoor performance. Suited for 4", 6 and 8" pot production.

*Spathiphyllum* 'Double Take' has strong natural branching habit and medium green, lanceolate leaves that get more oval with maturity. Research has shown some cold tolerance. Flowers are held on strong stems above the foliage. Fast growing. Suited for 3", 4", 5" bulb pan, 6 and 8" pot production.

**From Bernecker's Nursery:**

*Dracaena* 'Rikki' has deep-green glossy leaves, with highlighted yellow bands in the center running the length of the leaf. Typically grown with several tips per pot producing a bush-like look. Suited for 6", 8", 10" and 14" pot production.

**Foliage Plants and Acclimatization**

Customers frequently complain that foliage plants don't last long and that they lose their appeal after awhile. If this happened after a customer bought a large Weeping Fig, they may be reluctant to make a similar purchase. Chances are that this customer placed the plant in lower light than it needed, or that they bought a non-acclimatized plant. Placing a plant in the wrong place is the single most common mistake people make when dealing with foliage plants. Although growers provide helpful labels with information about the light, watering and nutrition requirements of a particular plant, customers often overlook these. For best survival chances, it is crucial to make the right selection and match plant requirements with interior conditions. To make matters worse, some retail places, especially the large chain stores, do not have special areas specifically allocated for foliage plants, and/or do not provide the best care for them. Consequently, even though the plants arrived in excellent condition, their health may start to decline while they are still on the shelf. Once such a plant gets in the customer's home, it may quickly lose its attractive appeal.

What about acclimatization? In the interior environment, foliage plants are frequently placed under conditions that are not ideal for best performance and longevity. In fact, the primary objective of an interior landscape is to retain its attractive display for extended periods without growing much. Frequently interior light levels are lower than plants need to survive. Plant performance and survivability in the interior environment is affected by the level of acclimatization the plant received while in production. Acclimatization is defined as the adaptation of a species to a new environment. Acclimatization is crucial to the interior performance of a foliage plant and customer satisfaction depends on foliage plants retaining their aesthetic appeal longer than flowering plants.

Successful foliage plant growers provide greenhouse and nursery conditions that promote maximum plant growth until the crop approaches saleable size. Maximum growth requires optimum light, water and nutrition. The higher the light levels, the higher the nutrition level must be to meet the requirements of an actively photosynthesizing and growing plant. Lower light levels mean lower plant nutritional requirements and fewer irrigation periods. Most trees and shrubs used indoors are grown under full sun or shade levels less than 50% for part of their production cycle. Consequently, they must be acclimatized prior to use indoors. *Aglaonema*, *Dieffenbachia* and other herbaceous foliage plants seldom if ever need to be acclimatized.

There are two sides of acclimatization, the aboveground and the belowground. Adapting plants to lower light levels than production light levels characterizes the aboveground portion. To prepare their plants for the low light levels found indoors, growers move their crops when they have almost reached saleable size, and place them under lower than production light levels, reduce fertilizer levels and increase time periods between watering. The belowground acclimatization promotes development of a more extensive root system for increased water uptake as the relative humidity in most building interiors is less than 50%.

If you purchase tree or shrub form foliage plants for rewholesale or retail sales, you need to be able to recognize the signs of acclimatized plants. The following table provides some comparative guidelines. The price of the product also can be considered indicative. Acclimatized plants cost more to produce because they incur production cost due to the additional time required for acclimatization. Both wholesale growers and retail personnel need to be familiar with acclimatization and its impact on interior performance of foliage plants.

Even when acclimatized, foliage plants may not last very long in the interior environment. Even if the plants don't die, they frequently (and sometimes rapidly) lose their attractive appearance. Low light combined with higher than desirable night temperatures, cause plants to use up what little food reserves they may have. Long, spindly growth is a common result of low light levels. Necrotic leaf margins are regularly caused by low relative humidity. Variegated plants regularly lose their coloration when placed in interiors. Pothos, Crotons, *Dracaena* 'Florida Beauty' are but a few examples. Customers have a preconceived notion that foliage plants should "last forever," and this is not often the case. We need to educate them that a 6" Pothos basket is no different than a 6" Poinsettia pot. When both lose their appeal, they should be replaced. Another alternative is to plant them in the garden, in a shady spot and treat them as an annual!

A satisfied customer is also a knowledgeable customer; and you, as a grower or a retailer, can help them make an informed choice. New foliage plant cultivars with diverse and novel characteristics and improved interior performance are a necessary part of maintaining customer satisfaction and interest.

<u>Acclimatized Plants</u>	<u>Non-Acclimatized Plants</u>
Med. to dark green leaves	Yellowish to light green leaves
Large leaves	Small leaves
Flat leaves	Partially folded leaves
Thin leaves	Thick leaves
Widely spaced leaves	Closely spaced leaves
Internodes long	Internodes short
Thin to medium stems	Thick stems
Leaf position horizontal or slightly flexed	Leaf position upright
Few new leaves	Many new leaves
Wide branch angles	Acute angles