

Overwintering Giant Elephant Ears and Caladium

Caladium, a native plant of South America, is widely used in the shade garden to provide form and a splash of color. Their large, distinctive leaves are instantly recognizable, earning them the name “elephant ears or angel wings”, not to be confused with their giant leaved cousins, Colocasia, also known as Elephant Ears.

There are over 1,000 varieties of Caladium, many of these varieties are not hardy below USDA Cold Hardiness Zone 9. Generally, in climates colder than Zone 9, these tropical plants must be dug up and overwintered once the temperature drops consistently below 60 degrees. When the time is right, dig up the Caladiums with the foliage intact, leaving the dirt surrounding the roots. Place the plants in a cool, dark place for 2 to 3 weeks so they will go into dormancy. After a few weeks, when the leaves are brown and dried, they may be trimmed to the soil line. Cut out any rotten areas and apply a fungicide. Store the bulbs in a cool, dry place that remains around 50 degrees. Another option is to grow Caladium in containers that can be brought inside in late fall. Once they are brought inside they should be placed in a fairly dark location and watered sparingly until they can be brought outside next spring.

Much like Caladium, Giant Elephant Ears (*Colocasia*), also in the family *Araceae*, are a tropical plant that is hardy to USDA Zone 8. Since much of Oklahoma is USDA Cold Hardiness Zone 7 (some in the northern areas of the state are in 6b), the safest option of conserving these plants is to remove them from the ground and bring them inside once winter has begun. Elephant Ears do not like cold, wet soil and are likely to rot if left in the ground over the winter. Once the first hard freeze has occurred and killed the foliage, dig widely around the Elephant Ears tuber being careful not to nick the tuber or overly disturb the root system.

Caution should be taken when cutting the foliage of Giant Elephant Ears. The leaves contain calcium oxalate which may cause skin irritation. The tubers can be

brought inside to dry. Once dry, the soil may be gently brushed off. The tubers may then be stored in a container surrounded by sand or vermiculite, then be planted outdoors once again in early spring once all danger of frost has passed.

NOTE: A caveat to both of these winterization procedures for the Tulsa area . . . if our winter happens to turn out to be milder than normal, it is possible to overwinter both of these tuber types in the ground by providing a little extra mulch “blanket” on top of them to help retain the earth’s warmth. It’s a close call to make and we don’t really know the outcome until afterwards. Thus, the decision to leave the tubers in the ground or bring them inside is best left up to the gardener themselves.